

**ART, GENDER IDEOLOGY AND AFRIKANER NATIONALISM:**  
**A HISTORY OF THE VOORTREKKER MONUMENT TAPESTRIES**

**Liese van der Watt**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation considers the role both verbal and visual culture played in the growth and articulation of Afrikaner nationalism. For this reason it focuses not only on the central topic under discussion, namely the Voortrekker tapestries, but also on the discourses that informed the production of these tapestries and the circumstances surrounding the decision to commission them.

The Voortrekker tapestries were commissioned in 1952 by the *Vrou-en Moederbeweging van die ATKV (Suid-Afrikaanse Spoorweë en Hawens)* and presented to the Voortrekker Monument in 1960. It was decided that the tapestries should depict the Great Trek of 1838 and, due to his widely acclaimed status as an authority on visual representations of Afrikaner history and culture, the artist WH Coetzer was approached to be the designer of the tapestries.

But Coetzer's version of the Great Trek of 1838 perpetuates many popular myths about the Afrikaner past and, in examining this version, I have identified certain discourses as being influential. For example, the role of Gustav Preller in the formation of Coetzer's historical consciousness; the precedent set by the 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek for later verbal and visual depictions of the Great Trek; the period 1948 to 1952, marked by significant historical events such as the triumph of the National Party, the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument and the tercentenary Van Riebeeck celebrations and, finally, the role *volksmoeder* ideology played in shaping Coetzer's vision of the Great Trek.

Drawing on these discourses, I proceed to examine the iconography of the Voortrekker tapestries. A number of themes in the tapestries are identified and elucidated with reference to a range of contemporary theoretical writings. Finally, the dissertation moves beyond a consideration of the iconography of the tapestries, investigating instead the status of needlework. I argue that the gender ideology embedded in the production of the tapestries is paralleled in the historically sanctioned separation of 'art' from 'craft'. Just as 'craft' has been marginalised in relation to 'art', so the Voortrekker tapestries and, with them, the women who made the tapestries, were marginalised in the public spheres which were inhabited and controlled by Afrikaner men.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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A special word of gratitude to my parents and J Theron for their love and support.

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The financial support of the University of Cape Town is also gratefully acknowledged.



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## GLOSSARY

AB	<i>Afrikaanse Broederbond</i> (Afrikaans Brotherhood)
ATKV(SAS&H)	<i>Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging van die Spoorweë en Hawens</i> (Afrikaans Language and Cultural Movement of the Railways and Harbours)
AWB	<i>Afrikaanse Weerstandsbeweging</i> (Afrikaans Resistance Movement)
FAK	<i>Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge</i> (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Movements)
GNP	<i>Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party; 1934-1939</i> (Purified National Party)
GWU	Garment Workers' Union
HNP	<i>Herenigde Nasionale Party; 1939-1948</i> (Reformed National Party)
NGK	<i>Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk</i> (Dutch Reformed Church)
SAVF	<i>Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie</i> (South African Women's Federation)
SAVLU	<i>Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Landbou-unie</i> (South African Women's Agriculture Union)
SNMK	<i>Sentrale Nasionale Monumente Komitee</i> (Central National Monuments Committee)
SVK	<i>Sentrale Volkskomitee</i> (Central Volk Committee)
VMB	<i>Vrou-en Moederbeweging</i> (Women and Mother's Movement)
UP	United Party

## COLOUR PLATES

### THE VOORTREKKER MONUMENT TAPESTRIES

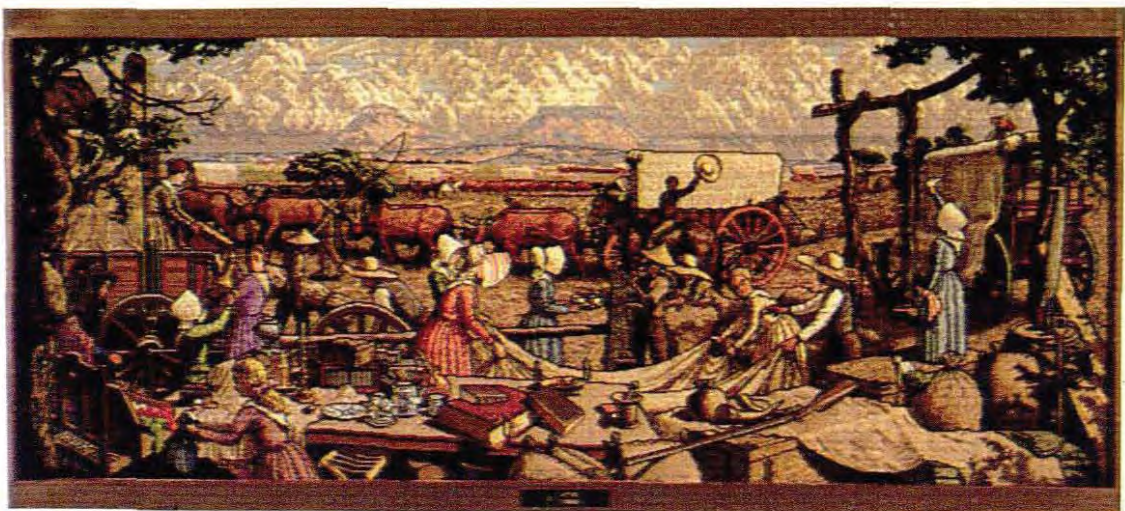
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JW Prinsloo, WH Coetzer



Die verjaarsdag

The birthday

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JW Prinsloo, WH Coetzer

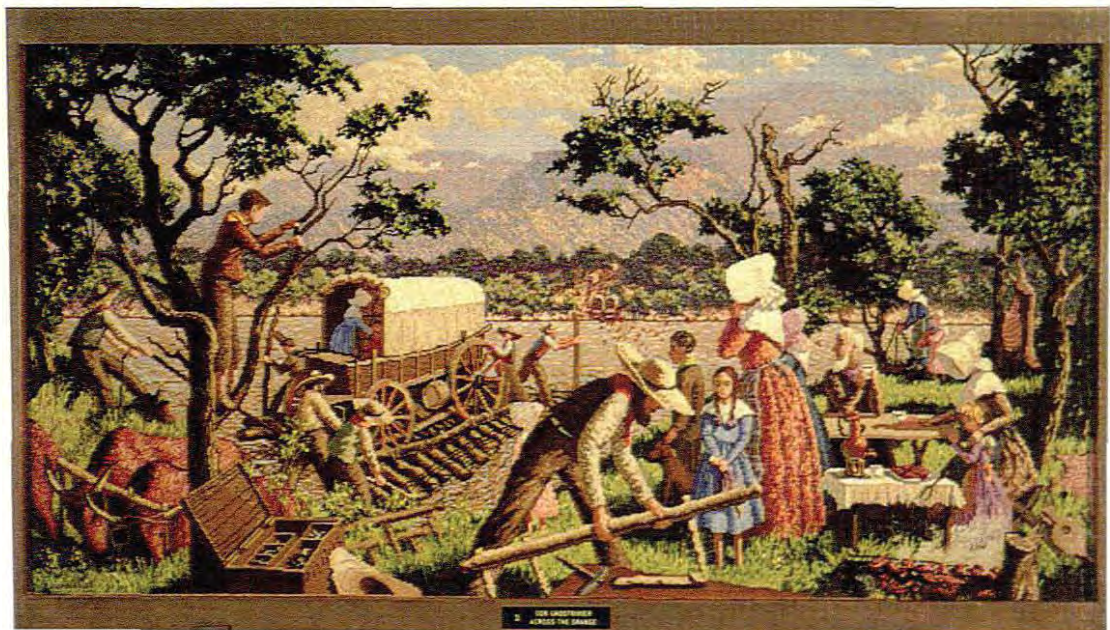


Die uittog  
The exodus



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JW Prinsloo, WH Coetzer

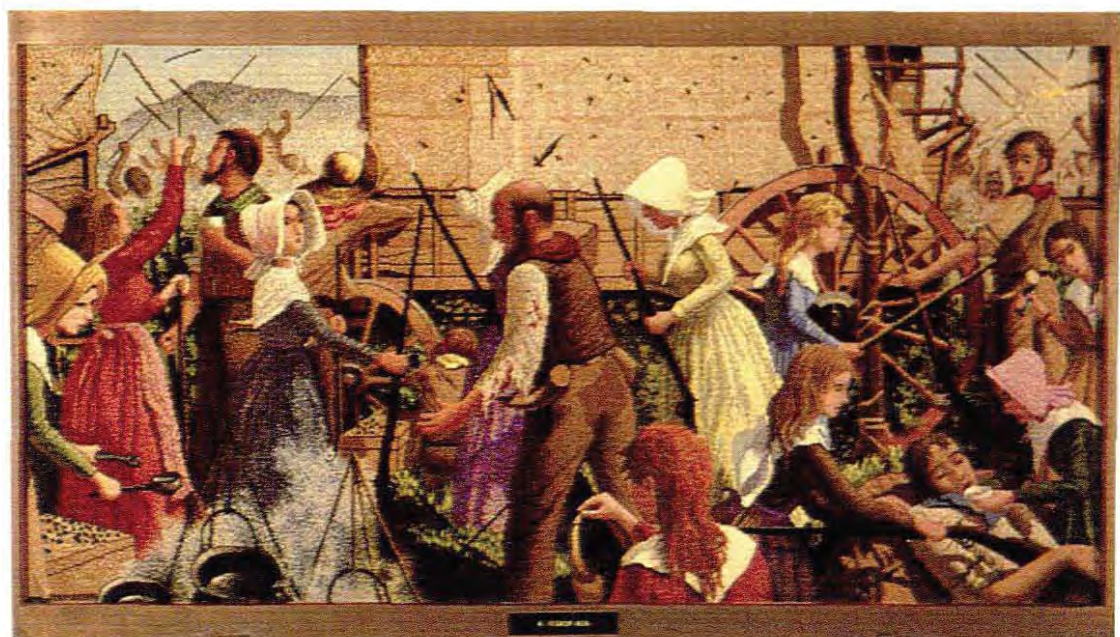


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The outspan at Thaba Nchu

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Begräfnis in die veld

A funeral in the veld



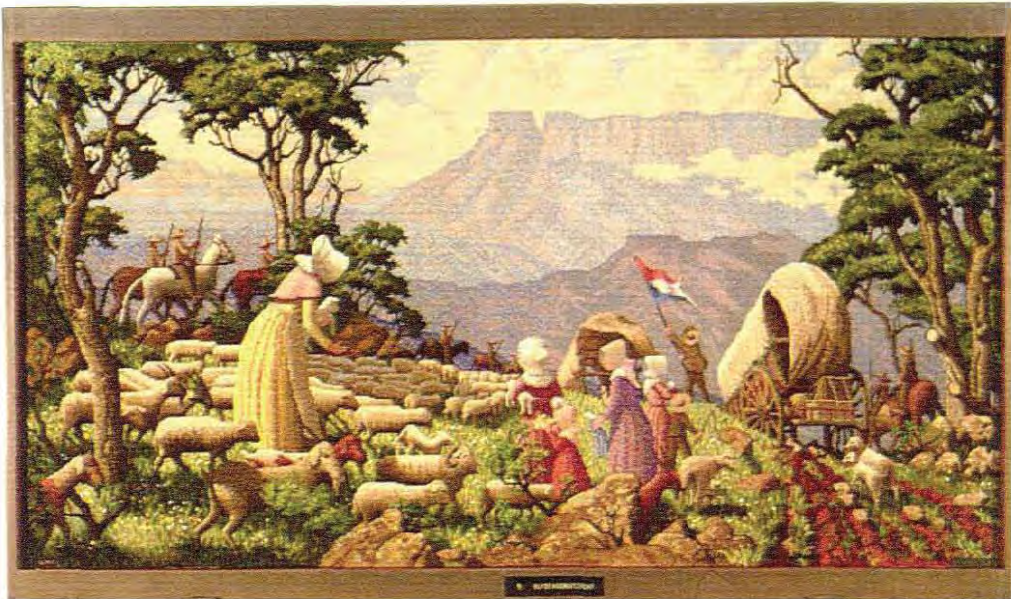
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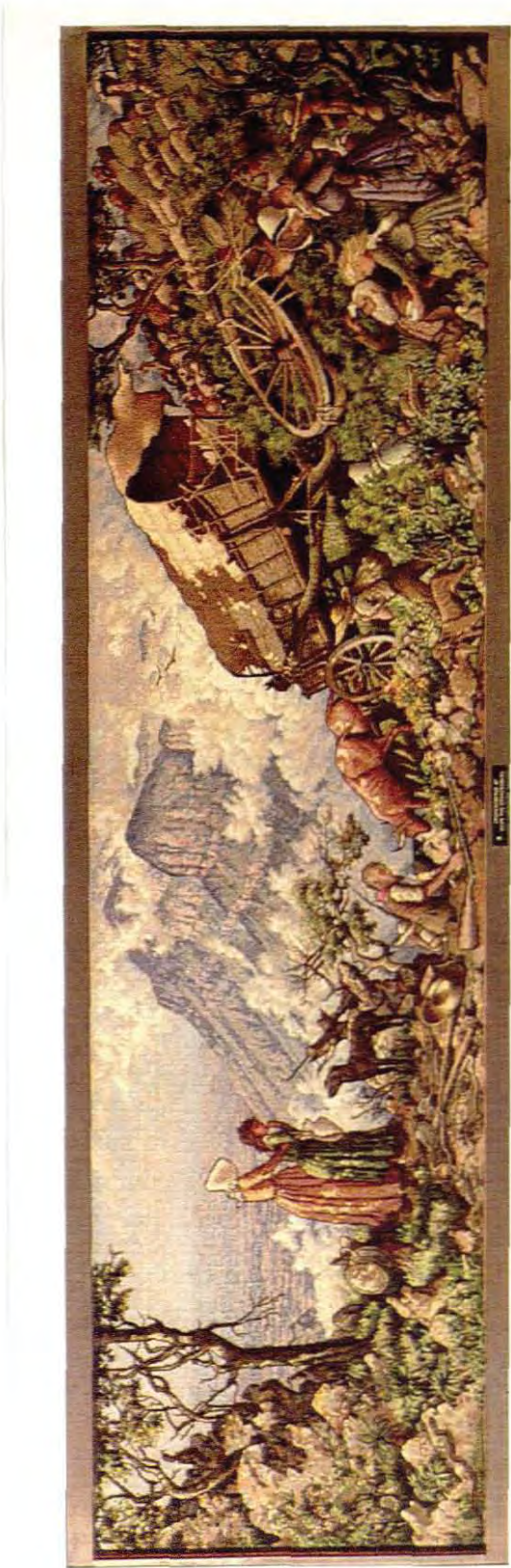


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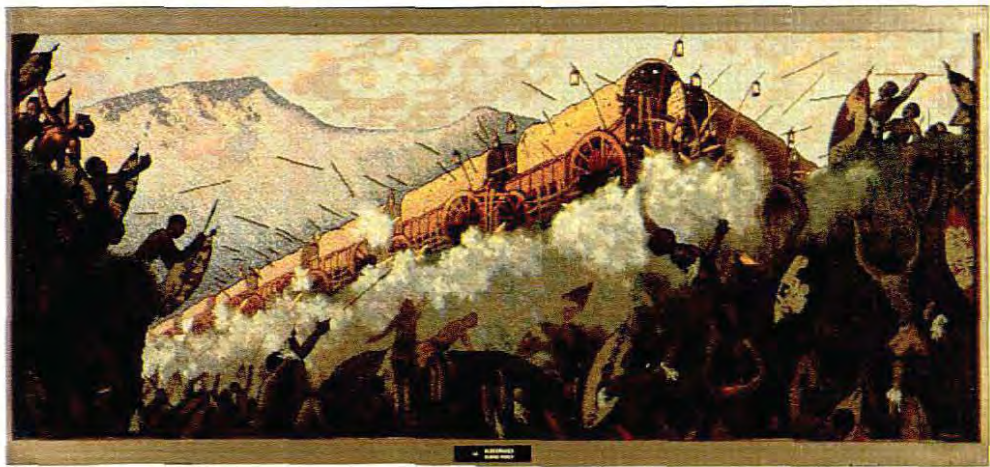


Boekevár

Family devotions

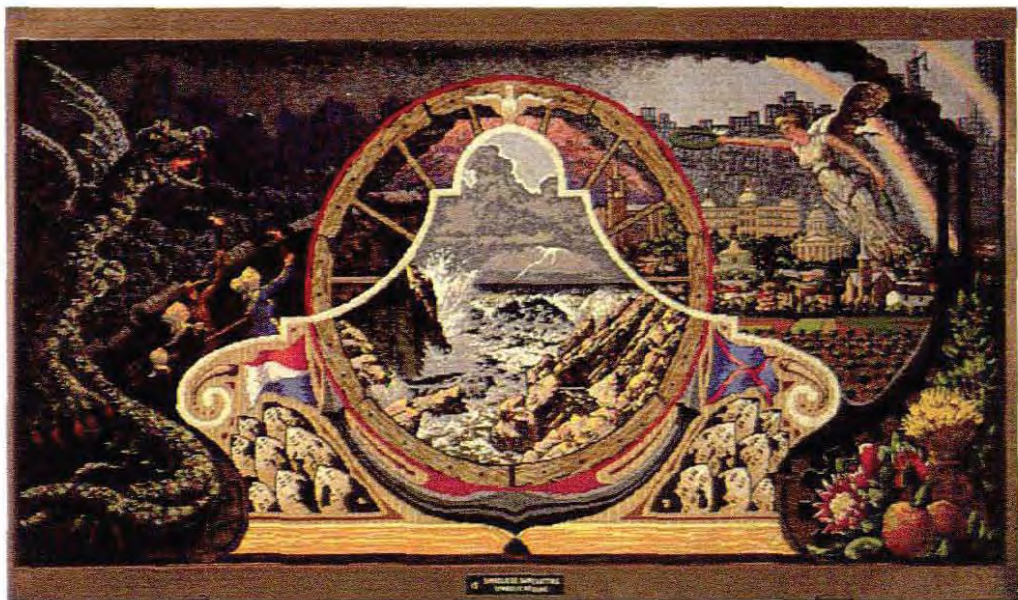


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Bloedrivier  
Blood River

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H Rossouw, WH Coetzer



Simboliese samevatting

Symbolic résumé

## INTRODUCTION

...the surface [of the artwork] is no longer still but tells the story of its making.  
(Bal 1991:4)

In keeping with Benedict Anderson's (1991) dictum that nations are 'imagined' and narrated through print culture, the literature on the history of Afrikaner nationalism has concentrated on historical documents to 'read' the Afrikaner nation through a consideration of class<sup>1</sup>, gender<sup>2</sup>, religion<sup>3</sup> and race<sup>4</sup>. With the notable exception of Anne McClintock (1993:70) who asserts that 'national collectivity is experienced preeminently through spectacle', all of these studies therefore have tended to privilege the written word over the visual image as an expression of nationalism. Referring to the Great Trek centenary celebrations of 1938, McClintock writes that

the singular power of nationalism has been its capacity to organize a sense of popular, collective unity through the management of mass national *commodity spectacle* (1993:70; her italics).

Like McClintock and in contrast to Anderson, this dissertation considers the role both verbal and visual culture played in the growth and articulation of Afrikaner nationalism. For this reason it focuses not only on the central topic under discussion, namely the Voortrekker Monument Tapestry (or, hereafter, Voortrekker tapestries)<sup>5</sup>, but also on the discourses that

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<sup>1</sup> See especially O'Meara (1983), Brink (1986; 1987; 1990), Hyslop (1993), and also Moodie (1975).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Hofmeyr (1987), Bloomberg (1989), Brink (1990), Kruger (1991), McClintock (1993). Also, forthcoming, a PhD dissertation by M du Toit (1996, University of Cape Town) entitled Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism: A Social History of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging, c. 1870-1939. Du Toit considers the philanthropic and cultural activities of middle-class Afrikaner women and examines politics of maternalism within the context of nationalism.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Du Toit (1983; 1984), but also Moodie (1975).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Moodie (1975), Bloomberg (1989) and Posel (1991).

<sup>5</sup> Although there are in fact fifteen tapestry panels, the official name is The Voortrekker Tapestry / Die Voortrekkertapisserie. To obviate confusion I have opted to use a plural designation throughout this thesis.

informed the production of these tapestries and the circumstances surrounding the decision to commission them.

The making of the Voortrekker tapestries was first proposed in May 1952 at a meeting of the Germiston branch of the *Vrou-en Moederbeweging van die ATKV (Suid-Afrikaanse Spoorweë en Hawens)* (Women and Mother's Movement, hereafter VMB) by Nellie Kruger. Kruger felt that Afrikaner women should give something of lasting value to the Afrikaner *volk*, which would be an inspiration for generations to come<sup>6</sup>. Kruger's loyalty to the Afrikaner *volk*, which is illustrated by this suggestion, was a constant feature throughout her life.

Born in 1907, Kruger joined numerous welfare and cultural women organisations, such as the *Oranje-Vrouevereniging*, the *Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging* and the *Vrou-en Moederbeweging van die ATKV*, which reserved their charity for an exclusively Afrikaner constituency. She obtained a Masters degree in Afrikaans-Nederlands and worked as a journalist at the republican and nationalist newspaper *Die Volksblad*. In 1947 and 1948 she launched a weekly journal, *Die Ruiter*, with her journalist husband JJ Kruger. In the first edition of *Die Ruiter* the editors claimed that

*Die Ruiter* gaan meehelp om die onverkinklike hartklop [van Afrikanerskap] sterk en die bloedstroom suiwer te hou.

(*Die Ruiter* will help to keep the unfaltering heartbeat [of Afrikanerdom] strong and its blood pure.)

They also expressed the desire to be '*volks...en nasiedienstig*' ('of service to the nation') (*Die Ruiter* 9 May 1947:2).

When she proposed the gift tapestries in 1952, Kruger explicitly stated that it should be made for that holy shrine of Afrikanerdom, the Voortrekker Monument, which had been

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<sup>6</sup> This history of the Voortrekker tapestries is taken from Nellie Kruger's book published in 1988, entitled *Die Geskiedenis van die Voortrekkermuurtapisserie. Geskryf op versoek van die Beheerraad van die Voortrekkermonument*.

inaugurated some three years earlier. Initially she wanted the tapestries to depict the spectacular 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek. However, due to a period constraint which stated that nothing in the Voortrekker Monument should date to later than 1853, it was decided that the tapestries should represent the Great Trek itself. Because her primary concern was to make something to be placed inside the Voortrekker Monument, Kruger was quite content to alter the subject matter of the intended tapestries.

Contributions towards the cost of the tapestries were asked for from the entire *volk* and by December 1954, R26 000 had been collected. It would seem that it was mostly women's organisations that took it upon themselves to collect the money<sup>7</sup>. Nine women<sup>8</sup> were selected to execute the tapestries, although it is not entirely clear on what basis they were chosen. One possible reason for their selection is that they were all taught either by Juanita Grant, a well known needle-work teacher (who will be discussed in my third chapter), or by one of her pupils. These nine women worked for eight years to execute the 3 353 600 stitches in 'gros point' (the size of a match's head) on fifteen panels<sup>9</sup> in 130 colours of wool. The tapestries were presented to the Voortrekker Monument in December 1960.

Due to his widely acclaimed status as an authority on visual representations of Afrikaner history and culture, the artist WH Coetzer was approached to be the designer of the tapestries - a job which kept him busy for close to five years. Coetzer, born in 1900, initially trained as a wagon-maker but with the encouragement of artists Alfred Palmer and Edward Roworth - the notoriously conservative academic realist - he was persuaded to study art. He entered

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<sup>7</sup> Women's organisations such as the *Vrouelandbouvereniging* (Women's Agricultural Organisation), the *Vrouesendingbond en Mede-Sendingarbeiders* (Women's Missionary League and Co-workers), the *Rhodesiese Christelike Vrouevereniging* (Rhodesian Christian Women's Organisation), the *Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging* (Afrikaans Christian Women's Organisation) donated money.

<sup>8</sup> They were MS Pienaar, JW Prinsloo (three panels), H Rossouw (two panels), N Kruger (two panels), JF Coetzer (two panels), HJ Combrinck, MB de Wet, AW Steyn (two panels), and MR Oosthuizen.

<sup>9</sup> The initial plan was to make 25 panels of 27" x 36" (68 X 91cm) each. It was eventually decided that 15 panels should be produced - 36" (91cm) in width, ten panels of 5' (1,52m), four panels of 6' (1,83m) and one panel of 9' (2,74m).



the London Polytechnic in 1925 where he obtained, after a year, the class medal for a (mediocre) still-life entitled The Dusty Shelf. Following his return to South Africa he had an exhibition in Johannesburg in 1931, which was described as ‘undistinguished’ and included mostly romantic realistic portraits<sup>10</sup>. As will become clear in my first chapter, this romantic realist style proved to be appropriate for the kind of work Coetzer began to produce after reading Gustav Preller’s Voortrekkermense in 1934. But soon thereafter he was forced to defend his artistic style in an art world that had begun to respond positively to non-representational trends in modern art. As late as 1951, when many of South Africa’s leading artists were producing abstracted works in keeping with international trends, Coetzer wrote a piece entitled ‘Ultra-Modern Art as I see it’ in which he pleaded for academic realism. In this article, he wrote that ‘God made man [in] his own image and made him beautiful...He has given us beautiful models to work from, and yet how do the ultra-moderns react towards these God-given models?’ (Coetzer 1951:11). According to Coetzer, modern art was sacrilegious because, in its departure from naturalism, it did not acknowledge God as its master<sup>11</sup>.

It is important to remember that the subject matter of the tapestries, namely a depiction of the Great Trek of 1838, was familiar to most, if not all, Afrikaners. The spectacular reenactment of this historical event in 1938, and the entrenchment of Voortrekker history as official Afrikaner history, ensured that Afrikaners were well versed in the symbols, the histories and the rhetoric of an emerging nationalist discourse. In addition, media reports

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<sup>10</sup> This biographical information about Coetzer’s life is obtained from an unpublished thesis by A Meiring Die Kuns van Harry Coetzer (n.d.), and from Coetzer’s autobiography (1980).

<sup>11</sup> Coetzer was acclaimed for the *kultuur-historiese waarde* (cultural historical value) of his art. As one critic explained rather apologetically: ‘*Wat die opvatting van sekere modernistiese kunskeners oor sy werk ook mag wees, persoonlik voel ek oortuig daarvan dat hy besig is om baanbrekerswerk te doen waarvoor hy later erkenning sal moet kry*’ (Van Der Westhuizen 1938:160) (‘Whatever the conception of certain modernistic art connoisseurs might be about his work, I personally am convinced that he is busy with pioneering work for which he should later be acknowledged.’) This recognition came in 1965 when Coetzer was awarded the medal of honour by the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* (South African Academy of Arts and Science).

and press releases written between 1952 and 1960 - the eight years during which the tapestries were designed, executed and finally presented to the Voortrekker Monument - described the tapestries in terms which perpetuated already entrenched beliefs about the Afrikaner past<sup>12</sup>. As a result, the Afrikaner *volk* was able effortlessly to read the tapestries as expressive of their collective national identity. Within the ideological framework of Afrikaner nationalism, the meaning of the tapestries therefore was transparent to its intended audience.

But,

[w]hat would a reader or viewer have to know to make this image intelligible? What would he or she have to believe to make it credible? (Melosh 1991:10).

These two questions, posed by Barbara Melosh (1991) in her study of New Deal art in the USA in the 1930s, presuppose an investigation into the ideologies that dominated popular consciousness, and concomitant with that, into the discourses that informed the making of this art. As Bal (1991:6) indicates, the meaning of art is located 'in a social situation rather than in an individual genius'. This study similarly wishes to examine the social discourses that influenced WH Coetzer, the designer of the tapestries, in his vision of the Great Trek of 1838.

In Chapter One of this dissertation I identify four discourses<sup>13</sup> which seem to me to have been instrumental in forming WH Coetzer's vision of the Great Trek. Starting with an early influence which Coetzer himself admitted to, I consider the work of the cultural entrepreneur, researcher and writer, Gustav Preller, who spent most of his life writing a history of, and for, the Afrikaners. This he published first in his own newspapers and periodicals, and later in book form. Born on a farm in the Transvaal in 1875, Preller fought

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<sup>12</sup> Various articles were published which discussed the tapestries and the history which they depict, in very similar terms - for instance, Kruger N (1953), Pienaar (1956a; 1956b), Du Plessis (1960).

<sup>13</sup> Like Barbara Melosh (1991:3) I take discourse to refer to 'the social negotiation of meaning, the ongoing and contested process of making sense of (or even constituting) social life.'

with the Pretoria commando in the South African War. In 1903 he became the editor of *De Volksstem*, a newspaper supporting the South African Party (SAP) under the leadership of Gen. Louis Botha. In 1925, after Botha's death in 1919, Preller joined the National Party and became the editor of the nationalist newspaper *Ons Vaderland*. From 1936 until his death in 1943, he was employed as state historian<sup>14</sup>.

In my discussion of Preller, I focus specifically on his texts dealing with the Great Trek and explore the strategies he used to authenticate these texts. In this assessment I have found the studies on Preller by various historians, but especially those by Isabel Hofmeyr (1987; 1988), very useful. This section is followed by a consideration of the centenary Great Trek celebrations of 1938, which I discuss against the background of the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s. I demonstrate, firstly, that expectations for a future republic were jeopardised by various crises in Afrikaner identity in the 1930s. Working with numerous revisionist studies of this period in Afrikaner history, my intention has been to provide an overview of the 1930s, rather than to explore differences in the interpretation of particular aspects of the history of Afrikaner nationalism. For this reason I have drawn on key texts by Moodie (1975) and O'Meara (1983), while at the same time taking into account the threat to Afrikaner unity posed by gender (e.g. Brink) and class (Brink, O'Meara 1983) relations. Secondly, I discuss how the past was reinterpreted during the centenary celebrations, with the aim of convincing Afrikaners across the board of their collective identity. During these celebrations, Afrikaners 'imagined' themselves to be a nation through the combined use of spectacle and oration - strategies reminiscent of what Stuart Hall (1992:291-298) has termed 'narratives of nationhood' in his discussion of national cultures and identity.

As a third discourse informing Coetzer's artistic vision, I focus on the period 1948 to 1952. Treating the years from 1948 to 1952 as a coherent period in the history of Afrikaner nationalism, I argue that these years witnessed the clear articulation and entrenchment of

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<sup>14</sup> Biographical information taken from Hofmeyr 1988:524-525.

racist policy. I indicate that these developments must have influenced Coetzer because the triumph of the National Party in the election of 1948 was an enormous feat for all Afrikaners who identified with the notion of the *volk*. Significantly, the commissioning of the tapestries in 1952 coincided with the Van Riebeeck festivals, during which, as Rassool and Witz (1993) and Witz (1993) have demonstrated, white South Africans celebrated three hundred years of white settlement to the exclusion of black South Africa.

The final concept that influenced Coetzer's vision of the Great Trek, is the ideology of the *volksmoeder*. This ideal vision of Afrikaner womanhood emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, and was used to prescribe traditional gender hierarchy in the face of destabilising attacks on the unity of both the private family and the 'public' family - the *volk*. The *volksmoeder* ideal was widely publicised and, since the focus of the Voortrekker tapestries is said to be on the role of women in the Trek, it is essential to consider the impact of *volksmoeder* ideology on WH Coetzer's conception of Voortrekker women. *Volksmoeder* ideology has been the focus of feminist historians who have criticised the relative absence of gender issues in most accounts of Afrikaner nationalism, but as I indicate in the section on the *volksmoeder*, these writers have concentrated on the role of the *volksmoeder* ideal in areas such as literature (Hofmeyr 1987, Kruger 1991), class (Brink, Hyslop 1993) and race (Hyslop 1991), rather than visual traditions.

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I look at the iconography of the tapestry panels. As Mieke Bal (1991:27) explains, iconography amounts to '*reading* images as what, visually, they are *not*' (her italics). By drawing on the discussion in my first chapter on the social and political conditions informing the production of the tapestries, as well as on Paul Carter's (1986) study of settler exploration in Australia, I identify a number of themes in the tapestries. Carter's insightful work provides interesting ways to think and to theorise about what is, in effect, the primary theme of the tapestries, namely the depiction of the frontier in Afrikaner history. In addition, I found many similarities with New Deal Art of the 1930s,

which Barbara Melosh (1991) has studied in terms of gender relations and the representation of gender. In particular, the depiction of the American frontier family, which Melosh describes in terms of the 'comradely ideal', seems to correspond to the ideology of the *volksmoeder*, which guaranteed hierarchy not only in the private family, but also in the 'public' family or *volk*.

As a first theme, I consider the depiction of the Voortrekker family in the tapestries and the role played by the *volksmoeder* ideal in Coetzer's articulation of relations within this family. In my second theme I move to the concept of time as linear in frontier art and consider how this concept is linked to notions, firstly, of expansionism, and secondly, of progress. A work edited by William Truettner (1991) which focuses on the representation of the western frontier in American art dating to the period 1820-1920 was particularly informative in linking notions of progress with the project of Christianity. The dichotomy between Christianity and savagery is elaborated on in my third theme, in which I explore the depiction of race in the tapestries. This aspect, which was all-important by 1952 when the tapestries were commissioned, is persistently cast in terms of polar oppositions such as white-black, civil-savage, believer-pagan. As I demonstrate, each of these opposites presupposes an hierarchy that privileges the history and experience of white settlers.

My final chapter moves beyond a consideration of the iconography of the tapestries, investigating instead the status of needlework. Focusing on this issue allows me to read the tapestries 'against the grain', that is, to concentrate on the silences and the absences in, what has become, the generally accepted history of the Voortrekker tapestries recounted in Nellie Kruger's book *Die Geskiedenis van die Voortrekkermuurtapisserie* (1988). In this chapter I argue that behind the officially documented history of the tapestries, there lurks another lesser known history which tells the story of the construction of a feminine ideology and, in particular, the construction of subordinate identities for Afrikaner women. In addition, I argue that the gender ideology embedded in the production of the tapestries is paralleled in

which Barbara Melosh (1991) has studied in terms of gender relations and the representation of gender. In particular, the depiction of the American frontier family, which Melosh describes in terms of the 'comradely ideal', seems to correspond to the ideology of the *volksmoeder*, which guaranteed hierarchy not only in the private family, but also in the 'public' family or *volk*.

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the historically sanctioned separation of 'art' from 'craft'. Just as 'craft' has been marginalised in relation to 'art', so the Voortrekker tapestries and, with them, the women who made the tapestries, were marginalised in the public spheres which were inhabited and controlled by men.

## 1. DISCOURSES INFORMING COETZER'S VISION OF THE VOORTREKKER TAPESTRIES

### 1.1 Gustav Preller's Factual Fictions

In his autobiography WH Coetzer writes that, in 1934, while staying on Jan Smuts's farm Doornkloof, he came across Gustav Preller's series of books on the Voortrekkers entitled Voortrekkermense (I-VI). Coetzer (1980:34) recalls reading this history and writes that

[f]or the first time in my life I learnt of the tragic and heroic past of my own people; fully realised the hardships, the privation, the tragedies, the massacres, the ravages of wild animals and of the deadly tsetse fly and mosquito that my forbears had to suffer on their Great Trek into the wild and turbulent interior of South Africa. Through this experience, a new world opened to me.

It is quite obvious from this quote that Gustav Preller's vivid prose and graphic details of the Voortrekkers' lives, made a huge impression on Coetzer and, as I will demonstrate, played a major role in popularising the life histories of the Voortrekkers. Following his reading of Voortrekkermense, Coetzer's allegiance to and identification with the Voortrekkers - his 'forbears' - was so complete that

[f]or the next thirty years of my life I was to dedicate myself to honouring the memory of my people, by putting on canvas their tragic and heroic past (Coetzer 1980:34).

This 'tragic and heroic past' to which Coetzer was to dedicate his life's work seldom deviated<sup>1</sup> from the version of Voortrekker history that Gustav Preller constructed in his numerous books<sup>2</sup> - a version that has recently been questioned by various historians<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In section 2.1.3 The settling of volksmoeders I discuss how Coetzer has changed Preller's version of the battle of Vegkop in the tapestries.

<sup>2</sup> The works by Preller dealing with the Great Trek are Piet Retief (1908), Baanbrekers (1915), Daagboek van Louis Trichardt (1836-1838) (1917), Voortrekkermense I-VI (1918, 1920, 1922, 1925, 1938, 1938), Voortrekkerwetgewing (1924), Hoe ons aan Dingaansdag kom (1928) and Andries Pretorius (1940).

<sup>3</sup> Isabel Hofmeyr (1988:522) observes that 'Preller has been the subject of almost no systematic research. He is, of course, mentioned in standard texts on Afrikaans literary history and historiography, which all pay homage to him as a 'founding father' of both disciplines. But he is disregarded in studies of Afrikaner



FA van Jaarsveld argues, for example, that '[Preller] was the creator of a Great Trek mythology which still exists today' (1990:12, my translation). Similarly, in an article on Preller, Isabel Hofmeyr (1988:522) comments that

[the] movement of Boers from the Cape to the interior in the 1830s has become the key myth of Afrikaner nationalism, thanks largely to Preller's written, and more importantly his visual<sup>4</sup>, version of the Trek, an interpretation that since the 1910s has been widely received as the dominant one.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, both Van Jaarsveld and Hofmeyr speak of the Great Trek as a myth, thereby pointing to the fact that the largely unorganised relocation of frontier farmers in the 1830s was transformed in Preller's account into a planned, homogenous 'Great Trek'. These more recent readings of Preller's work will be considered in the second chapter of this dissertation. My concern in this section is to examine the impact he had on his early Afrikaans readers who received his work on the Great Trek as fact. The strategies he used to convince these early readers of the truth of his texts were so successful that Preller's version of history became institutionalised as authentic Afrikaner history, especially in the 1930s.

The success of Preller's texts depended on his ability to write emotionally gripping, that is, 'authentic' narratives that created a close identification between reader and text. This was achieved both through the form - or style - and content of his texts. As far as content is concerned, Isabel Hofmeyr (1988:526) has observed that Preller created 'narratives of a type of everyday experience'. She writes:

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nationalism by O'Meara and Moodie, even though he left some 300 volumes of his papers in the Transvaal archives, where they occupy seventeen meters of space.' While Hofmeyr (1987, 1988) seems to be the first historian to have made Preller the subject of her research, some Afrikaner historians like JJ Oberholster (1975) and Van Jaarsveld (1990) have also questioned the verity of Preller's texts.

<sup>4</sup> See Hofmeyr (1988) for a reference to the film which Preller made in 1916 entitled *De Voortrekkers*.

<sup>5</sup> Hofmeyr (1988:522, fn.5) adds that '[t]he assertion that the dominant visual version of the trek derives from Preller is made deductively. Preller's extensive pictorial research showed that there were few visual precedents on which he could draw. Most pictures that come after him bear a strong resemblance to his original formulations'. She cites as examples LJ van Zyl and JH Rabe *Die Groot Trek in Beeld* (*The Great Trek in Pictures*) (n.p., n.d.) and Hans Rooseboom's *The Romance of the Great Trek* (Pretoria, 1949).

[Preller] fed off a range of 'intimate cultural forms: letters, diaries, photograph albums and collections of things with past associations' (Hofmeyr 1988:423-524 quoting Johnsen (ed.) 1982:210).

These, Preller

translated into a range of cultural objects which reached people through a variety of media: books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, plays, debating circles, lectures, fêtes, festivals, films, souvenirs, Christmas cards and so on (Hofmeyr 1988:524).

Preller's employment of these 'intimate cultural forms', representative of a past era, transported his readers easily to another time and place. Probably the most convincing of these cultural forms was the diary, because unlike other cultural forms such as photos and letters which tended to amplify isolated incidents on the journey into the interior, diaries represented a continuous day-to-day narration of events and changing landscapes. In other words, as Paul Carter (1986:71) explains in his book The Road to Botany Bay (1986), which focuses on the colonial exploration of Australia:

The open form of the journal [or diary], unlike the carefully balanced moral fable or the hierarchic structure of the essay, travelled light: it was responsive to every turn in the road.... It travelled without a map, it did not imagine itself at the end of the journey looking back.

For Preller, the editing and publishing of the diaries of Voortrekkers became a method for introducing his readers to the realities and hardships of the Great Trek. This strategy is also mentioned by Paul Carter who concludes that journals or dairies presented highly realistic strategies to immerse the reader in the world of the explorer. He writes that the journal,

kept day after day, left no spaces unrelated and brought even the most distant objects into the uniform, continuous world of the text (Carter 1986:69).

In addition, the information thus related seemed beyond dispute:

Readers readily understood that, although journals might resemble poems or novels, they also fulfilled the factual demands of history and even science ... The journal narrative might resemble the plot of a novel, but it was not fiction (Carter 1986:72).

Apart from publishing edited diaries such as those of Louis Trichardt (1917) and Andries Pretorius (1940), Preller also painstakingly researched and assembled his Great Trek histories

from the flotsam and jetsam of correspondence and oral accounts of people taking part in the Trek. These he published as edited recollections like the *Voortrekker* series. He also recreated the lives of certain Voortrekker heroes like Piet Retief, based on both Retief's own diary and on other people's recollections of him. To authenticate these texts even more, Preller provided condensed biographies of his diarists and informants, tracing their lineage and linking them to prominent Voortrekkers - even if only through a vague connection. By contextualising them in this way, he enhanced the credibility of their evidence and he gave them, in effect, authority to talk about the Afrikaner past. By relying on diaries, but also on oral evidence and correspondence, Preller's narratives were characterised by a 'realistic' portrayal of historic events.

But Preller also made use of clever *stylistic* techniques to reinforce the verity of his texts. Firstly, he used a system of cross-referencing between different texts. Whenever an informant recounted an incident, Preller would refer the reader by way of footnotes to some of his other texts which dealt with the same subject. In this way, a network of events was used to substantiate one another. As a result, Preller created the impression that the entire Great Trek was made up of a few events with which every Afrikaner eventually became familiar. Secondly, he also used direct speech at strategic points in his narration of the Trek. Although these had obviously been invented, they amplified the tension and strengthened the guise of authenticity which Preller was hoping to achieve. Thus, for example, when describing the murder of Piet Retief by Dingane, Preller interjects his narration with direct exclamations of '*Verraad!*' ('Betrayal!') and '*Here help!*' ('God help [us]') (Preller 1906:148-149).

For Preller's readers, the 'realism' of his texts, which he achieved both through gripping narratives and clever stylistic methods, amounted to an objective and convincing rendering of Afrikaner history. In addition, Preller's 'obsessive concern for the visual detail of what

people wore, ate and drank' (Hofmeyr 1988:527), assisted his readers to visualize the Great Trek in clear and tangible terms. In *Voortrekkermense I* he claimed, for instance, that:

*Tesame met die ander dokumente stel hierdie stuk [die leser] in staat om die Voortrekkers te leer ken soos hulle hulself gesien het, op die trek, in die laër, op die jag en in die huislike kring; aan hul arbeid, hul godsdiens en vermake, in hul gewoontes en in die kleredrag van hul tijd* (Preller 1918:1).

(Together with the other documents, this piece enables the reader to acquaint himself with the Voortrekkers as they saw themselves, on trek, in the laager, while hunting and in the domestic circle; in their labour, their religion and recreation, in their customs and in the attire of their time).

Yet, despite his will to truth and attempts to create authentic documents of a Voortrekker past, Preller's vision has been characterised as 'romantic' by JJ Oberholster (1975), one of the first historians to reappraise his works - albeit without actually questioning some of its fundamental precepts. This characterisation in terms of romanticism is particularly interesting given that Coetzer was also described in these - somewhat paradoxical - terms:

*Kunskritici beskryf Coetzer as 'n romantikus...wie se sin vir egtheid en werklikheid hom ook 'n realis maak. Hy het probeer om die Afrikaner volk in al sy lotswisselinge weer te gee, in sy nederlaag, sy ellende en in sy oorwinning* (Van der Merwe 1947:57).

(Art critics describe Coetzer as a romantic...whose sense for truth and verity makes him also a realist. He attempted to portray the destiny of the Afrikaner volk, in his annihilation, his misery and in his triumph.)

According to Oberholster (1975:51), the first characteristic of Preller's strain of romanticism may be found in his tendency to side with the 'outsiders' of history - a characteristic typical of 19th-century Romantic views of the world. Preller wrote in reaction against earlier depictions of the Afrikaner that were mostly unsympathetic or biased in favour of the British<sup>6</sup>. Related to this, Oberholster (1975:52) argues, is the nationalist sentiments

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<sup>6</sup> Ken Smith (1988:66) endorses this opinion when he writes that '[Preller] has been widely seen in Afrikaner circles as one of the most important South African historical writers in the first four decades of the twentieth century, on account of the extent of his work, his sympathetic portrayal of the Afrikaner's past, the new light he shed on the past and his style of writing.'

expressed in Preller's work<sup>7</sup>. Preller always emphasised the Afrikaners' '*vryheidsdrang*' ('desire for liberty'), of which the Great Trek was a prime example<sup>8</sup>. According to Preller, the benevolence of God constantly assisted the Afrikaners in their struggle for freedom. Oberholster (1975:52) claims that this unwavering belief in the divine hand is another aspect of romanticism in Preller's writings.

The common denominator between Coetzer and Preller seems to be the ability to be simultaneously a romantic and a realist. Coetzer based most of his paintings on the writings of Preller, exhibiting the same tendencies to romanticise the Voortrekkers as heroic, great men and women. As far as his purported realism is concerned, he carefully researched the visual aspects of Preller's history. He (Coetzer) traced the routes of the Voortrekkers, studied the landscape and the places where the Voortrekkers allegedly crossed mountains and rivers. He researched the implements and house-hold utensils of the Voortrekkers, the clothes they wore, the wagons they travelled in - all in order to build up a visual library of an authentic Voortrekker way of life. These he meticulously reproduced in a naturalistic style in his many paintings dealing with the Voortrekkers and the Great Trek. But this realism gradually regressed into formulaic renderings of the past. In contrast to Preller's sustained realism, Coetzer started repeating himself by painting many similar versions of, for example, the battle of Blood River, the crossing of the Drakensberg and the battle at Vegkop.

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<sup>7</sup> Romanticism's concern with nationalism is also stressed in a discussion in Van Luxemburg, Bal and Weststeijn's *Inleiding in de Literatuurwetenschap* (1988:263-4) where it is written that '*[t]ijdens de romantiek was de belangstelling opgekomen voor alles wat te maken had met het nationale verleden*'.

<sup>8</sup> Ken Smith (1988:68) writes that '[Preller] saw the history of South Africa as a clash between Afrikaner nationalism, British imperialism and black "barbarism". And throughout, the Afrikaners were the heroes and the English and the blacks the villains.'

## 1.2 The Centenary Celebrations

The 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek must have played an immense role in shaping Coetzer's vision of the trek of the 1830s. Not only did the re-enactment of the Trek provide a much needed, as well as the first visual frame of reference for this historical event, but it also generated a profusion of literature about the Voortrekkers and their plight on their way into the interior of South Africa. Coetzer himself was active in contributing to this visual accumulation of Trek images by designing a host of memorabilia which was to be sold during the commemorative festival. For instance, he designed Voortrekker Memorial soup bowls (ceramic or silver plated) depicting in relief the future Voortrekker Monument and a scene from the lives of the Voortrekkers, a silver teaspoon depicting an assegai and the historic Church of the Vow in Pietermaritzburg, serviette rings, cigarette holders, ashtrays - all with Great Trek motifs. He also designed the *Eeufees-* (Centenary-) and *Herdenkingseëls* (Commemorative stamps), a set of six postage stamps which were on sale during the festival depicting images from the Voortrekkers' lives.

The festivals of 1938 commemorated a Trek that differed considerably from that which took place approximately a century earlier. Authors such as Van Jaarsveld (1988a and 1988b, both articles reprinted in Van Jaarsveld 1992) and Grundlingh and Sapire (1989) have studied the shifting meanings of Great Trek mythology in the history of the Afrikaners - the former considering a period of 150 years from 1838 to 1988 (1988a) and the latter a period of fifty years from 1938 to 1988. Although Van Jaarsveld (1988a) points out that reinterpretations of the Great Trek were already current in the 19th century and continued into the 20th century<sup>9</sup>, in this section my focus will fall specifically on the interpretation of the Trek around the time of the centenary celebrations.

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<sup>9</sup> See Van Jaarsveld (1988a, reprinted in 1992:98-109) for a thorough list of authors dealing with these interpretations of the Great Trek.

My own approach to interpretations of the Great Trek around 1938 has been guided by a concept Van Jaarsveld (1992:92) terms '*historiese bewussyn*' ('historical consciousness'). This concept comprises three dimensions: the aspirations and objectives for the future determine the exegesis of history and the perception of the present. Viewed in these terms, the reasons for staging a Great Trek centenary celebration could be sought for in the Afrikaners' expectations for the future. In this section I will firstly examine these future expectations, whereafter I will explore how the past was manipulated - 'the exegesis of history' - in the narrative of nationhood, at the time of the centenary celebrations.

### 1.2.1 The 1930s - expectations and realities: a brief history

The conception and planning of the Great Trek centenary celebrations took place in the context of a dramatic rise in Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s, a subject which has been examined by authors such as Dunbar Moodie (1975) and Dan O'Meara (1983). While O'Meara focuses on the years 1934-1948 and explains the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in terms of a change in the balance of class relations, Moodie casts his net somewhat wider and seeks the roots of what he terms 'the Afrikaner civil religion' in the 19th and much of the 20th century. In Moodie's view, this 'civil religion' refers to a faith in the uniqueness and predestination of the Afrikaners which was implanted in pupils at school during the apartheid era and yearly reaffirmed through *Volksfeeste* and religious rituals like the Day of the Covenant. Writing in 1975, Moodie (1975:21) noted that

[t]his civil ritual provides the civil faith with positive content. It unites Afrikaners in their sense of unique identity and destiny, inspiring the faithful, converting the sceptical, and ever reminding them of their sacred separation from English and Black Africans.... Most Afrikaners believed that they belonged to an elect People, most believed that at some time in the future...God would give them another republic....

While the origins of, and conceptions about this civil religion have recently been the centre of much discussion<sup>10</sup>, what is of central importance for this discussion is Moodie's (1975:21) contention that 'by 1938, the ordinary Afrikaner had made the main themes of the civil religion part of his own emotional identity'. The centenary celebrations fell on fertile ground: it encountered a people susceptible to what the centenary Great Trek set out to do, namely, to convince all Afrikaners of their common identity as an 'elect People', as 'God's Chosen People'. And this was achieved by masking the differences within Afrikaner society which were threatening *volkseenheid*.

*Volkseenheid* was an important issue at the time of the centenary celebrations because it was needed in the drive towards republicanism. According to Van Jaarsveld (1982:307-310), the centenary Trek should be seen as an extension of the Afrikaner republican ideal that emerged in reaction to the annexation of the Boer Republics around 1880. It was the *Afrikaner Broederbond* (hereafter AB) which developed and articulated this ideal in the twentieth century. In fact, the AB owes its origins to a skirmish between British Unionists and Afrikaner Republicanists after DF Malan made a pro-republican speech in 1918 on the Rand<sup>11</sup>. In 1933 the AB adopted republicanism as an official part of its policy after Gen. Hertzog had abandoned this ideal in 1926 with the signing of the Balfour declaration, which designated sovereignty for the Union. It should not come as a surprise, then, that the idea

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<sup>10</sup> Historian André du Toit (1983, 1984) has challenged the popular idea that the Afrikaners' conception of themselves as 'God's Chosen People' originated with the migrant farmers (the Voortrekkers) in the 1830s. For a more detailed discussion of his argument, see section 2.2 entitled Linearity, Expansionism, Progress.

<sup>11</sup> The Afrikaner Broederbond was founded by WH van der Merwe, JH Kloppe and DHC du Plessis under the name '*Jong Suid-Afrika*' ('Young South Africa'). As Bloomberg (1989:69) perceptively notes, the name 'Young South Africa' suggests the influence of Europe's nineteenth-century patriotic societies such as Young Ottoman, Young Ireland, Young Italy, Young Germany and Young Poland - 'all of whom fought for national unity, liberation from foreign or tyrannical rule, internal democracy and national independence.' JH Kloppe's ideal was 'One race, one tongue, one flag' and in articulating these obvious republicanist ideals the AB was an heir to the Krugerist tradition of Afrikaner political autonomy. Shortly after its foundation it changed its name to the Afrikaner Broederbond and went underground in 1921. For a thorough examination of the AB see especially Bloomberg (1989), but also Serfontein (1970), Moodie (1975:50-51 & 96-115) and O'Meara (1983).



of the commemorative Great Trek originated with Henning Kloppe, one of the founders of the *Afrikaner Broederbond* and a leader in Afrikaner society<sup>12</sup>.

The commemoration of the Great Trek provided ample opportunities to make Afrikaners conscious of their common past - a shrewd strategy aimed at provoking an aspiration for a common future of republicanism. As Moodie (1975:14) puts it, echoing Van Jaarsveld's understanding of '*historiese bewussyn*',

[t]he promised future republic linked the past and the future, ensuring a dynamic tension of crucial importance to Afrikanerdom in the 1930s and 1940s. Any appeal to the sacred Afrikaner past was thus implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, a reminder of the coming glory.

By instigating a sense of nationalism, the staging of a centenary celebration of the Great Trek also served to mask all class and political differences. As McClintock (1993:71) points out 'the *Eupees* was a calculated and self-conscious effort by the Broederbond to paper over the myriad regional, gender and class tensions that threatened them.'

Kloppe approached the cultural movement of the Railways, the *Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging (Spoorweë en Hawens)* (hereafter ATKV (SAS & H)), of which he was the chairperson, to take the initiative in staging a second Great Trek. His decision to turn first to this association reveals a perceptive understanding of the immense problem that class differences posed to Afrikaner unity. As Grundlingh and Sapire (1989:22) explain:

Of all the Afrikaners in state employ, those on the Railways probably had the most reason to feel inferior and stigmatized ... He [Kloppe] saw in the symbolic re-enactment of the original ox-wagon trek an opportunity for those Afrikaners in menial capacities on the Railway to identify with pride in a specific Afrikaner mode of transport of a former 'golden age'.

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<sup>12</sup> Henning Kloppe was a prominent leader in the Afrikaner community. He joined the South African Railways and Harbours in 1911, and in 1935 became the Harbour superintendent at Mosselbay. In 1943 he became the MP for Vredefort and would later become the speaker in Parliament. Apart from founding the *Afrikaner Broederbond* in 1918, he also started the *Reddingsdaadbond* with JD Kestell and SH Pellissier in 1939, a movement which aimed to bring economic relief to poor white areas.

Similarly, O'Meara notes (1983) that gaining the support of the railway workers was an important step in achieving *volkseenheid*. The reality of poor whites<sup>13</sup> presented a threat to Afrikaner unity because the danger existed that these Afrikaners could be mobilised by working-class organisations<sup>14</sup>. The AB did their utmost to secure the Afrikaner workers' commitment to the concept of a unified *volk* and the commemorative Great Trek presented an opportunity to unite all classes. O'Meara (1983:71) writes:

Hankering after the idealised 'unity' of the Great Trek and the republics, in terms of whose mythology all were farmers united against external enemies, class divisions were seen as the product of 'imperialism', and its *alter ego*, 'foreign capitalism'.

One instance of this kind of rhetoric is apparent in Dr Malan's famous oration on 16 December 1938 at Blood River, in which he called the fast-growing cities of South Africa the 'new Blood River' where Afrikaners now had to 'battle' on the labour market<sup>15</sup>.

A second tension threatening *volkseenheid* - the road to republicanism - is suggested by what McClintock calls regional differences, reflected in party political struggles among Afrikaners. Ruptures in Afrikaner unity <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ caused by the split in the National Party in 1934, when Malan managed to take most of the Cape Nationalists with him into opposing the Hertzog and Smuts coalition. In the north, however, support for Hertzog and Smuts's new United Party was strong. The AB, having accepted republicanism as an official part of their policy in 1933, rejected the coalition of Smuts and Hertzog, and it was the AB which held Malan's

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<sup>13</sup> Davenport (1991:319) notes that '[a]bout a fifth of the Afrikaner population could be loosely classified as "poor whites" in 1930 in the sense in which JFW Grosskopf of the Carnegie Commission used the term. He defined a poor white as "a person who has become dependent to such an extent, whether from mental, moral, economic or physical causes, that he is unfit, without help from others to find a proper means of livelihood for himself or to procure it directly or indirectly for his children" '. The Railways was just one remedial measure to rehabilitate these 'poor whites', another area being the mining industry.

<sup>14</sup> Davenport (1991:319) explains '[t]he Afrikaner was helped by the expansion of opportunities in the towns. Some had moved into the mines after the strike of (mainly British) workers in 1907, and by 1922 three quarters of the white miners on the Rand were Afrikaners ... This brought the Afrikaner workers into close association with English-speaking workers.... One immediate result of this contact was the establishment of close links between urban and rural Afrikaners and the Labour Party....'

<sup>15</sup> For a full transcript of Malan's speech see Pienaar (1964).

*Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party* (Purified National Party; hereafter GNP) together in the north.

Gender relations in Afrikaner circles were a third tension to be addressed by the commemorative Trek. As Brink (1986, 1987a & b) demonstrates, Afrikaner women working in the clothing industry were not only being organised into trade unions (which were regarded with suspicion), but they were also seen to pose a moral threat to the Afrikaner *volk*. These women were allegedly involved in prostitution and a danger existed of them 'perishing morally in the city and becoming a burden and a curse on the "volk" instead of an asset' (Brink 1987b:13 quoting and translating from a report of the Committee of the Harmonie Hostel to the Annual Congress of the SAVF, April 1935). The destitution of the Afrikaner woman was of great concern to Afrikaner leaders because, as they saw it, 'hers was the responsibility for inspiring the younger generation - the hope of Afrikanerdom - with deep love for their language and culture' (Moodie 1975:17). In other words, the Afrikaner woman had to be won back for the moral and cultural preservation of the *volk*. In this context, the ideal of the *volksmoeder* - to be discussed in detail at a later stage - with its concomitant associations of nationalism and loyalty to the Afrikaner *volk*, was emphasised as a dignified and virtuous role model for all Afrikaner women. In keeping with this notion of the *volksmoeder*, emphasis was also placed on the necessity and the value of the unified family in the development of the *volk*.

In conclusion, the Trek of 1938 became a political event in the guise of a nationwide festival. It was at once a reaction against the Smuts-Hertzog coalition of 1934, an attempt to integrate the 'poor whites' into the *volk*, and a means to unite Afrikaner women and men in one future. In short, the centenary celebrations were supposed to bring together people who shared a past and, by implication, could hope for a common future.

Having examined why the centenary ox-wagon trek took place, I would now like to explore how the Trek was staged and managed. To answer this question, I will turn to the

Afrikaners' exegesis of history, specifically the history of the trek of the 19th century. I will examine how Great Trek mythology was articulated, nurtured and reinvented in order to arouse a mass reaction which WH Coetzer (1980:39) described as 'a nostalgic patriotic fervour [which] swept across the length and breadth of South Africa'.

### 1.2.2 1938 - An opportunity for inventing the *volk*

Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty (Mercer 1990:43 quoted by Hall 1992:275).

This quote condenses my concerns in the previous section, where I examined in broad outlines why Afrikaner identity came under scrutiny in the 1930s. In this section my intention is to look at how the commemoration of the Great Trek was used to re-define Afrikaner identity as something 'fixed, coherent and stable' after the experience of doubt and uncertainty in the period prior to it.

Stuart Hall (1992:275) writes that as traditional societies break up, 'the cultural landscape of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality which gave us firm locations as social individuals' begins to fragment. It could be argued that Afrikaners in the 1930s (and even earlier than that) were experiencing this kind of transformation from a traditional society, or, as Hall (1992:275) writes, a 'dislocation or a de-centring of the subject', or the 'loss of a stable "sense of self" '. In other words, Afrikaners were experiencing their identity as a shifting, dynamic and non-unified site.

In keeping with a cautious response to anything which is modern and implies change<sup>16</sup>, Afrikaner leaders of the 1930s harked back to a supposed idyllic past which could be

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<sup>16</sup> This anxiety repeatedly manifested itself in the cultural sphere. For example, WH Coetzer's art is praised for being free from '*al daardie dekadent modernistiese rigtinge wat [van] die kuns gebruik maak om hul eie gewaande voortreflikheid en selfs "goddelikheid" te besing*' ('all that decadent modernist trends which use art to extol their own excellence and even "godliness" ') (Diederichs 1945:17). The reference to '*goddelikheid*' is probably contingent on Coetzer's well-known opinion that modern art, in its departure from naturalism, is sacrilege because it does not acknowledge God as its master.

carefully controlled and used to posit a fixed, unified identity. As Anthony Giddens explains:

In traditional societies, the past is honoured and symbols are valued because they contain and perpetuate the experience of generations. Tradition is a means of handling time and space, which inserts any particular activity or experience within the continuity of past, present and future.... (Giddens 1990:37-8 quoted by Hall 1992:277-278)

Afrikaner leaders, and specifically the AB, recognised the commemorative Great Trek as a major opportunity to strengthen Afrikaner identity by anchoring it to past experiences. They took the lead in not only organising the Trek but also in manipulating the political views of the *volk*. As Laclau demonstrates, this kind of society, where control is located in the centre, is the very antithesis of a modern society where '[the] centre is displaced and not replaced by another, but by a "plurality of power centres"' (Laclau 1990 quoted by Hall 1992:278)<sup>17</sup>.

The AB used its extensive influence to arrange greeting committees in every town that the ox-wagons of the Commemorative Trek travelled through. These committees were led by the many clergymen who were members of the AB<sup>18</sup>, and in virtually every town the wagons were greeted with repeated references to the unity and uniqueness of the Afrikaner *volk*. The *Gedenkboek van die Ossewaens op die Pad van Suid Afrika* (Commemorative Book of the Ox-Wagons on the Road of South Africa), edited by Dirk Mostert and published in 1940, contains all the sermons and orations delivered along the road of the ox-wagons from Cape Town to Blood River and Pretoria. As such, this book provides an excellent inventory of the different ways in which Afrikaner leaders persuaded the Afrikaner people

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<sup>17</sup> Most debates on postmodernism invoke decentralisation as one of the key characteristics distinguishing postmodernism from modernism, which is associated with centralised power. As Hall (1992:278) notes, however, Laclau argues that 'modern societies...have no centre, no single articulating or organising principle'. These contradictory remarks about the nature of modernism are to me indicative of the confusion that pervades the modernism/postmodernism debate. For the purposes of my argument, however, it will suffice to draw a distinction between traditional and non-traditional societies.

<sup>18</sup> These clergymen were from either the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church, hereafter NGK), or from its sister churches the *Gereformeerde Kerk* and the *Hervormde Kerk*, since the AB restricted its membership to members from these Afrikaans churches only.

that they were a united *volk*. Interestingly, the rhetoric delivered at these centenary celebrations is consistent with the main elements Stuart Hall (1992:292-295) selects to demonstrate how the narrative of a national culture is told, or - to appropriate Benedict Anderson's (1991) much cited terminology - how nations imagine themselves as communities.

The first construct Stuart Hall (1992:294) identifies as relevant to narratives of nationhood, is 'the invention of tradition'. He quotes Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983:1) who remark that '[t]raditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented'. According to Hobsbawm and Ranger an invented tradition is

a set of practices, ... of a ritual or symbolic nature which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviours by repetition which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historical past. (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983:1 quoted by Hall 1992:294)

Probably the most obvious invented tradition in Afrikaner culture is the Great Trek itself. What seems to have been the haphazard relocation of frontier farmers during the 1830s became known as the 'Great Trek', thereby implying an homogenous, collective movement of people in search of a better future. Significantly, Isabel Hofmeyr (1988:109) remarks that

[t]he Trek is now so massively institutionalised that it is hard to imagine a time when every schoolchild did not learn about the Trekkers every year. But at the turn of the century the word itself was relatively new and had only entered the vocabulary in the 1880s. As late as 1910 people still used the word by which the migrant farmers had always been known - *emigrante* or *landverhuysers* (emigrants).

The myth of the Great Trek was contingent on the idea that the early Afrikaners - the Voortrekkers - saw themselves as a Chosen People travelling to the Promised Land. But historian André du Toit (1984:75) has demonstrated that

[t]here is no contemporary evidence to support the notion that the Trekkers saw their venture as a (national) mission. (That is the later and retrospective Afrikaner nationalist interpretation of the Trek's significance.)

Likewise, Giliomee (1989:22) concludes that 'the Voortrekkers did not see the Great Trek of 1835-1838 as a positive expression of an Afrikaner political ethnicity, but rather conceived of themselves as "emigrants" and "expatriots" '19.

At the centre of the tradition of the Great Trek stood the Day of the Covenant or Vow, observed to commemorate the pact with God which was reportedly made by the Voortrekkers before their victory over Dingane in 1838 at Blood River. To illustrate the importance of this day in Afrikaner history, it is interesting to note that the commemorative Great Trek was staged in 1938 - exactly a century after Blood River, but not a century after the first Trek, which actually began three years earlier, in 1835. In addition, the commemorative ox-wagons aimed to reach either Pretoria or Blood River on 16 December, which was intended to be the climax of the celebrations. At Monumentkoppie outside Pretoria (the site of the future Voortrekker Monument) as well as at Blood River, 16 December 1938 was sanctified in accordance with the Voortrekkers' supposed binding pledge in the name of their ancestors, to honour this day of victory over Dingane as a Sunday.

L. Thompson (1985:144-188) and BJ Liebenberg (1988) have demonstrated that the story of Blood River and its Covenant is pervaded by myths<sup>20</sup> and that the practice of consecrating this day seems to be a recent tradition. In addition, according to Thompson (1985:180), the Covenant 'gradually became crystallised in the version that Sarel Cilliers had formulated when he was near death in 1871, 33 years after the event'.

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<sup>19</sup> Giliomee bases these conclusions on extensive research which he did at an earlier stage with André du Toit, published in Du Toit and Giliomee (1983) *Afrikaner Political Thought: Analysis and Documents: Vol. I 1780-1850*, pp. 4-27; 32-34; 195-207, 230-244.

<sup>20</sup> Liebenberg (1988) demonstrates the mythical nature of the belief that Blood River was won with the aid of a miracle. The populist version of this event suggests that it was 'miraculous' that the Zulus did not decide to attack at night, that the fog cleared in the morning and that it did not rain. Liebenberg counters this by arguing that the Zulus usually preferred not to attack at night when it was difficult to see. Secondly, he argues that it is surely nothing miraculous if fog clears and if it does not rain on a particular day. He further indicates what he regards as the mythical nature of beliefs stemming from Blood River, such as God being on the side of the Afrikaners, and the Afrikaner belief that it was a God-given task to keep South Africa white.

Thompson argues that the consecration of the Day of the Vow is the result of tradition, rather than a binding promise: it was not until 1864 that two ministers of the NGK, Huet and Cachet, persuaded the NGK to celebrate 16 December as a day of thanksgiving. Prior to this, there is no evidence that the oath was observed officially - only private occasions by religious individuals like Sarel Cilliers and Erasmus Smit are recorded. Thompson (1985:155) finds that 'the annual celebration of the battle in thanksgiving to God was never observed at all by the vast majority of the people who are said to have made it'. In December 1880, three years after the annexation of the Transvaal by British authorities in 1877, Afrikaners renewed the Covenant at Paardekraal. At this stage, the Vow attained symbolic meaning: it became a link with the heroic Afrikaner past and therefore a symbol of patriotism, and a sign that God is, and will be, on the side of the Afrikaners. From December 1881, the Day of the Vow was observed every five years as Dingane's Day and in 1894, 16 December was declared a public holiday in the OFS (Thompson 1985:144-188). Isabel Hofmeyr (1987:527) adds that 'it was only in the heightened nationalism of the second Anglo-Boer War<sup>21</sup> that [the Day of the Vow's] "orthodox" meaning began to be fabricated.'<sup>22</sup>

Another interesting fact which Thompson (1985:155-6) points out relates to the building of a church as a condition of the original Vow. He notes that a barnlike structure was erected in 1841 in Pietermaritzburg which served as a church, but it was never referred to as the fulfilment of the Vow. In 1861 it ceased to be a place of worship, and for the next 47 years it was used for commercial purposes. In 1908 it was converted into the Voortrekker

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<sup>21</sup> The second Anglo-Boer War refers to the South African War of 1899-1902. The first Anglo-Boer War would be the war of 1880-1881, also termed the '*Eerste Vryheidsoorlog*' ('First War of Liberation').

<sup>22</sup> Hofmeyr (1987:527) continues '[i]n the wake of the second Anglo-Boer War, this process was accelerated and, not surprisingly, Preller was prominent in the organisation of the anniversary day. In 1906, for example, [Preller's] book *Piet Retief* had been linked to the ceremony, and from time to time Preller's newspaper carried Dingaan's [sic] Day articles. By 1916 he was sending suggestions to local organizing committees on how they could observe the festival, often advocating that they link it to the commemoration of concentration camp victims.'



Museum<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, in popular Afrikaner historiography this little church has been consecrated as the original Covenant Church and, in 1949, when the Voortrekker Monument was erected, one of the panels of the marble frieze inside the Monument depicted the building of what is called the 'Church of the Vow'.

The Day of the Vow and the Battle of Blood River became institutionalised as major events in Afrikaner history and their status as authentic versions of the past was never questioned. Instead, they were endorsed by entering official Afrikaner history. As far as the visual versions of this history are concerned, both the taking of the Vow (fig. 16) and the Battle of Blood River (fig. 17) are depicted in the marble frieze inside the Voortrekker Monument, and the latter event is also portrayed in the Voortrekker tapestries (fig. 14).

According to Hall (1992:295), a second construct in narratives of the nation concerns the fact that

national identity is also often symbolically grounded on the idea of a *pure, original people or 'folk'*. But, in the realities of national development, it is rarely this primordial folk who persists or exercise power. (his italics)

This paradox is especially obvious with reference to the status of Afrikaner women. As will be discussed at a later stage, during the Great Trek centenary celebrations, heroic Voortrekker women were invoked and honoured as true *volksmoeders*. As such, their unyielding allegiance to the Afrikaner *volk*, which had persuaded them to leave the comforts of the Cape Colony in search of freedom for their *volk*, was emphasised. However, while

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<sup>23</sup> The question regarding the authenticity of the *Geloftekerkie* (Covenant church) has been a thorny one in Afrikaner history. After an archival study in the 1940s, *dominee* CWI Pistorius concluded that the Voortrekker church in Pietermaritzburg, taken for the *Geloftekerk*, was never intended to be the fulfilment of the Vow. The *Sentrale Volksmonumentekomitee* (Central Committee for the Nation's Monuments) grasped the serious implications of this finding and, in 1947, they appointed Professors HB Thom and SP Engelbrecht to verify the historical accuracy of Pistorius's claim. Ferreira writes that both Thom's and Engelbrecht's reports testify to 'thorough and scientific research' and quotes Thom's conclusion: 'Everything taken into account, we have to conclude that the old Voortrekker church - the current Voortrekker Museum - was indeed the Covenant Church of the Voortrekkers; they saw it in this light and we still regard it as such' (Ferreira 1975:228; my translation).

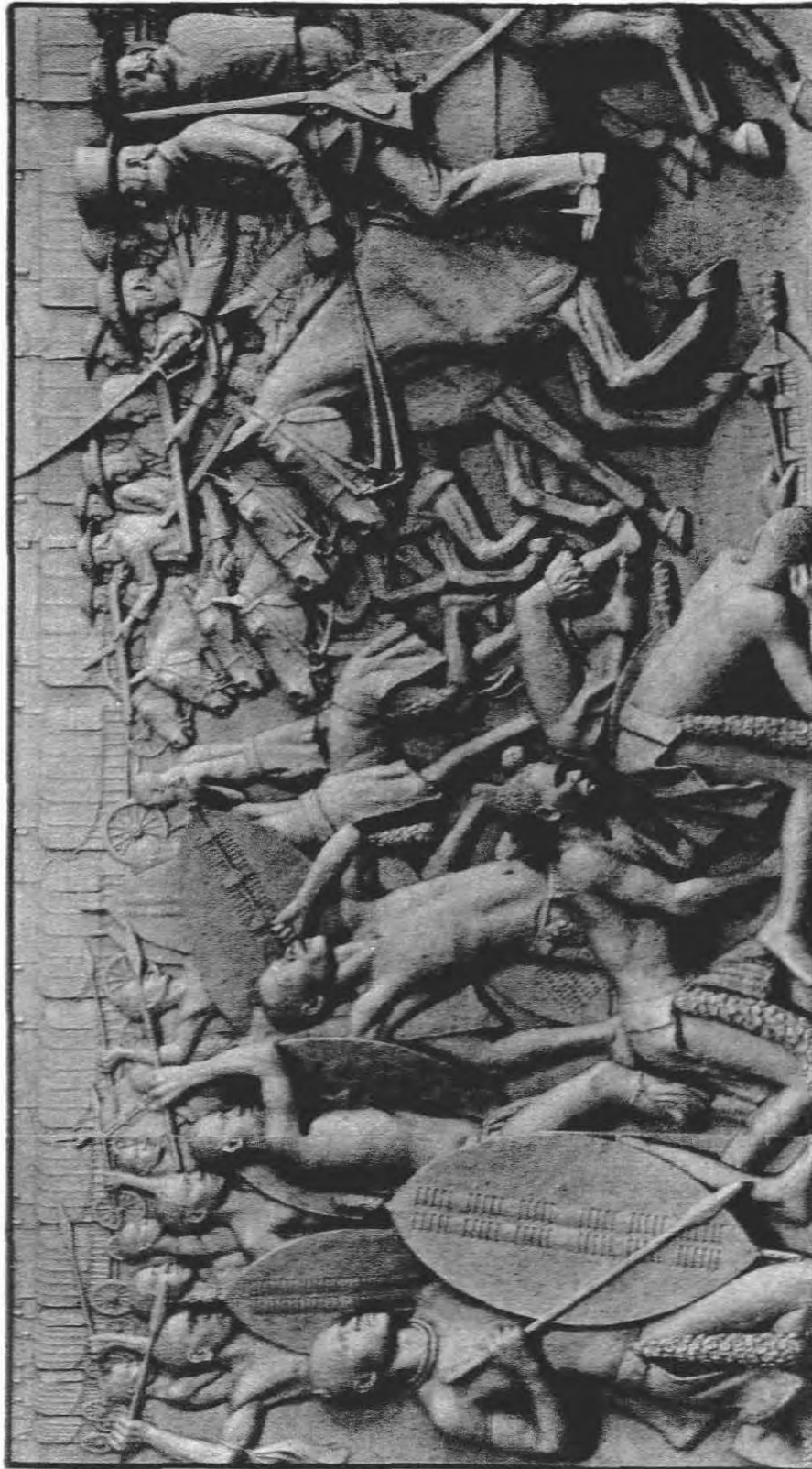
Figure 16: 'Making The Vow'

Panel 20 of the the marble frieze inside the Voortrekker Monument



Figure 17: 'The Battle of Blood River, 16 December 1838'

Panel 21 of the marble frieze inside the Voortrekker Monument



repeated reference was made to their virtue and their strength, their supposed powers were limited almost entirely to the domestic sphere.

The idea of a pure original people also extended to Voortrekker men. The Administrator of the Cape, Mr Conradie, said, in a speech somewhere along the route followed by the commemorative ox-wagons, that one could find 'more virtue and nobility in one [Voortrekker] ox-wagon than in a 100 motorcars today' (Mostert (ed.) 1940:116; my translation). This idealisation of the Voortrekker past extended to the fact that both in the literature and in the orations and speeches around 1938, the Voortrekkers are always portrayed as having been wronged by the authorities in the Cape. Repeatedly it is said that they trekked into the interior of South Africa because of the unjust and untimely emancipation of the slaves, the anglicization policy in the Cape, the liberal policy of the English with regard to the indigenous people, and to get better pasture land. Their desire for freedom carried them north and they are repeatedly praised for their high moral code and their strict social conduct. In accordance with the 'Chosen People' myth, Trek leaders like Piet Retief, Andries Pretorius, Hendrik Potgieter and Sarel Cilliers are regarded as super men and heroes of the *Afrikaner volk* and the purity of these Voortrekkers is invoked to remind Afrikaners in 1938 that they are a *volk* that has descended from virtuous and worthy people.

As a third characteristic of the narrative of the nation, Hall (1992:294-295) speaks of a 'foundational myth' on which the nation is built - 'a story which locates the origin of the nation, the people and their national character so early that they are lost in the mists of, not "real", but "mythic" time...' Interestingly, there seems to be an unresolved ambiguity in the Afrikaners' conception of their foundational myth. On the one hand, they cite the Great Trek of 1838 as the birth date of the *volk*. For example, in his address at the commemorative celebrations, the Administrator of Transvaal, JJ Pienaar, stated quite adamantly that by 1738 (a century before the Great Trek) there were no signs of a

consciousness of nationhood: the Afrikaner *volk* was born in 1838 - the year they trekked into the interior and the year of the Battle of Blood River (Mostert (ed.) 1940:31). Isolating 1838 as the birth date of the *volk* is of course a shrewd example of the political rhetoric used to emphasise the importance of the 1938 centenary celebrations. On the other hand, however, the national identity of the Afrikaner is sometimes also seen to be 'lost in the mists of time'. This is particularly evident in the vague and somewhat confusing words of the poet and writer DF Malherbe, who said on one occasion in 1938:

*Maar die Boeresiel is ouer as die Voortrek, en die ossewa is ouer as die Boeresiel*  
(Mostert (ed.) 1940:19).

(But the soul of the Afrikaner is older than the Great Trek, and the ox-wagon older than the soul of the Afrikaner.)

As I will indicate in my next chapter, this ambiguous position on the question of Afrikaner identity as simultaneously timeless and 'time specific', also manifested itself years later in Coetzer's designs for the tapestries.

The apparent timelessness of national identity, is coupled to another characteristic which Hall (1992:294) identifies, namely, 'national identity as primordial', which he explains as follows:

the essentials of the national culture remain unchanged through all the vicissitudes of history. It is there from birth, unified and continuous, 'changeless' throughout all the changes, eternal.

John Sharp (1994) has examined primordial discourses as they manifest themselves in Canada and New Zealand amongst the Huron and Maori respectively. Although there are obviously major differences between these groups and the Afrikaners of 1938<sup>24</sup>, Sharp's article provides a useful framework to examine discourses of uniqueness and unity based on primordial identity. By 1938, the Afrikaners, like the Maori and Huron today, were

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<sup>24</sup> The most obvious difference lies in the fact that whereas the Huron and the Maori can lay claim to their land by virtue of the fact that they are indigenous to it and have lived there for centuries, the Afrikaners are a settler community. Nevertheless, by 1938, Afrikaners believed themselves to have rights of ownership to the land, based firstly on the conviction that their ancestors had brought civilisation by way of Christianity to it, and secondly, on the misconception that the interior was quite empty and desolate when their ancestors arrived there. Repeatedly it is claimed that where their ancestors did battle with Black people, it was a people migrating from the north to the south just as they - the Voortrekkers - had migrated from the south to the north.

claiming the primordialness of their national identity. To underscore their link with the past, Afrikaner men grew beards like the Voortrekkers, and Afrikaner women donned what was perceived to be Voortrekker costume, attempting in this way to endorse the continuity of their traditions and spirit as a *volk*. Referring to the Maori and the Huron taking up 'traditional customs' such as native languages and practices, Sharp (1994:14) writes

[w]hen people take this[sic] practices up again, to redeem their tradition, the customs have an emblematic, or objectified, quality which results from the fact that they are, usually, no longer part of lived culture.

Likewise, during the centenary celebrations, Afrikaner men and women were resurrecting bygone traditions.

One of the reasons for employing primordial discourses is, as Sharp suggests, ethnic group mobilisation. He (1994:13) speaks of 'controlled ethnogenesis' to describe that 'process of identity formation and group mobilisation over which [the group] retain[s] a strong measure of control'. The staging of the ox-wagon trek with its re-enactment of traditions and customs is an obvious example of this process of controlled ethnogenesis. Indeed, as Hall (1992:294) notes, in primordial discourses the emphasis is '*on origins, continuity, tradition and timelessness*' (his italics). And as Kristeva (1993:2-3) observes,

the cult of origins is a hate reaction. *Hatred of those others* who do not share my origins and who affront me personally, economically and culturally: I then move back among 'my own', I stick to an archaic, primitive 'common denominator'.... (her italics)

In the 1930s, Afrikaners were articulating the threat that they felt was posed by British on the one hand, and Black people on the other hand, by harking back to what they considered to be their unique origins and traditions - their 'common denominators'.

The last characteristic Hall (1992:293) focuses on is that of the narrative of the nation as it is 'told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media and popular culture'. In all of these areas, writers like Gustav Preller played an enormous role and, by 1938, Preller-like metaphors and images were commonly used in numerous orations and addresses delivered

along the road of the commemorative ox-wagons. As Isabel Hofmeyr (1988:534) notes with specific reference to the account an old woman gave in 1938 of the *Makapansgat* siege, she was still

grasping the past through a cluster of Preller-type images which by 1938, the year of the Great Trek centenary celebrations, had reached quite frenzied heights.

With the help of all forms of popular culture, the story of the Great Trek took shape in the minds of the *volk*. This is clear from Grundlingh and Sapire's (1989:20) sweeping description of the enthusiasm with which Afrikaners identified with the construction of their past in 1938. It is worth quoting them at length:

Demonstrative and open displays were not regular features of Afrikaner public life, but the centenary celebrations provided some extraordinary scenes of near euphoria. Babies were baptized in the shade of the ox-wagon (some with names such as Ossewania, Kakebenia and Eufesia); young couples were married alongside the wagons; and elderly men and women were moved to tears as they were given, as a special honour, the opportunity to ride in the ox-wagons for a short distance. Men and women in Voortrekker garb welcomed the arrival of the wagons, and numerous streets were named after Voortrekker heroes. Children jostled to obtain grease from the wagon axles which, as a memento[sic] of the trek, was rubbed into their handkerchiefs. The multitudes then gathered to listen to patriotic speeches by local and other dignitaries, extolling and exaggerating the virtues of the Voortrekkers. At night, Afrikaans and Dutch folksongs, as well as religious hymns were sung around campfires.

In the same vein, one Attie Visser recalled, with an evident inclination towards the dramatic, instances of a blind girl tearfully touching the ox-wagon and a mother terminally ill with cancer expressing her only hope: to see the ox-wagon (Mostert (ed.) 1940:37).

The ox-wagon itself also became a much invoked symbol in 1938. In his commemorative address, N. Diederichs used the image of the ox-wagon to emphasise the Afrikaners' common heritage:

But the ox-wagon came. He called everyone and they all came. And here it is evident that those forces which unite the *volk*, are much bigger, stronger and more eternal than those forces which cause abnormal, political divisions (Mostert (ed.) 1940:51; my translation).

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Anne McClintock (1993:70-71) comments on this obsession with symbols when she writes that

[m]ore often than not, nationalism takes shape through the visible, ritual organization of fetish objects: flags, uniforms, airplane logos, maps, anthems, national flowers, national cuisines and architectures, as well as through the organization of collective fetish spectacle - in team sports, military displays, mass rallies, the myriad forms of popular culture, and so on.

And Maré (1992:12) remarks with reference to ethnicity in South Africa:

Certain symbols of [a] community become important and make it visible. They are felt to be obvious, common-sense signs showing that people belong together with those who are in every other way strangers. The symbols for that bond are most commonly cultural: language, religion, the dress associated with the cultural history, the festivals....

The employment of cultural symbols such as language and dress to validate identity, was evidently very successful in 1938. Indeed, as Grundlingh and Sapire (1989:20) point out: 'English speakers were ostensibly included in the proceedings, but it was unmistakably meant to be an exclusively Afrikaner celebration'. At the 1938 celebrations at Monumentkoppie in Pretoria, the British anthem was conspicuous by its absence from the proceedings, while the masses rejoiced in singing the Afrikaans poem '*Uit die blou van onse hemel*', which later became the national anthem of South Africa.

In conclusion, as Anne McClintock (1993:71) points out:

The *Eeufees* was, by anyone's standards a triumph of spectacle management, complete with the spectacular regalia of flags, flaming torches, patriotic songs, incendiary speeches, costumes and crowd management.

The attempts to forge an identity of unity for all Afrikaners finally paid off when, in 1948, the National Party came to power and officially instituted an era of segregationist policies.

### 1.3 Entrenching Apartheid: 1948 - 1952

1952 is a meaningful date in the present study: not only does it mark the year in which Nellie Kruger proposed the Voortrekker tapestries to a meeting of the *Vrou-en Moederbeweging*, but it is also the year in which white South Africa celebrated the tercentennial year of white settlement in South Africa. Nellie Kruger seems to have been only too aware of the significance of this year:

*Dit sal altyd iets moois en kosbaars bly dat die Vrou-en Moederbeweging in 1952 die besluit geneem het om 'n groot geskiedkundige muurtapyt as erfenis vir die Afrikaanse volk aan te pak. Dit was 'n gedenkjaar met die hele Suid Afrika in feesstemming om die aankoms van Jan van Riebeeck drie eeue gelede skouspelagtig te vier* (Kruger 1988:3).

(It will always be something beautiful and cherished that the *Vrou-en Moederbeweging* made a decision in 1952 to initiate a major historical wall-tapestry as an heirloom for the Afrikaner volk. It was a commemorative year with the whole of South Africa in a festive mood to celebrate spectacularly the landing of Jan van Riebeeck three centuries ago.)

But, as Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz demonstrate, the festival of 1952 was about more than just 'the landing, the settlement and the attributes of Van Riebeeck. [It] was [also] an attempt to display the growing power of the apartheid state and to assert its confidence' (Rassool and Witz 1993:448). The notion of 'the apartheid state' refers, of course, to the triumph in 1948 of the National Party and the subsequent entrenchment of segregationist policies. This apartheid South Africa was emphatically asserted in 1949, when the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument became a huge political event organised to honour the triumph in Africa of white civilisation and Christianity. But whereas the 1948 election and the 1949 inaugurational ceremony were almost exclusively directed at Afrikaners, the festival of 1952 saw the consolidation of white power, irrespective of language. Rassool and Witz (1993:448) write that

the [1952] festival raised fundamental questions about the construction and the composition of the South African nation, what constituted a national history, and the icons and symbols of that history.

As will be demonstrated below, the 1952 Van Riebeeck festival aimed to unite white South Africa, to the exclusion of black South Africa. It was in this climate of increasing alienation between black and white, rather than between English- and Afrikaans-speakers, that Coetzer conceived of his designs for the tapestries.

### 1.3.1 1948 - The triumph of apartheid<sup>25</sup>

Moodie (1975:235-259) identifies three issues on which the HNP focused in anticipation of the 1948 elections, namely, mother tongue education, the communist peril, and the racial question<sup>26</sup> (or, as NM Stultz (1974) puts it, the 'red menace' and the 'black peril'). Of these issues, it was especially the matter regarding race that would find explicit expression in Coetzer's designs for the Voortrekker tapestries and the emergence of a racial policy therefore merits some discussion.

The HNP approached the 1948 election seemingly united under the slogan of apartheid<sup>27</sup> but, as Deborah Posel demonstrates in The Making of Apartheid (1991), the meaning of

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<sup>25</sup> The 1938 centenary celebrations' claims for the unity of the Afrikaner *volk* was short lived. The Second World War and the 1939 elections brought with it, to use Moodie's term, the 'failure of *Volkseenheid*' as Afrikaner leaders agreed and disagreed on various matters. In 1939 the GNP (*Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party* or Purified National Party) was transformed into the HNP (*Herenigde Nasionale Party* or Reformed National Party) when Hertzog joined them into opposing his former allies, Smuts and the United Party, who were siding with Britain in the Second World War. The wartime coalition between Smuts's United Party, the Labour Party and the Dominion Party won the election. The fragile alliance between Hertzog and the GNP was terminated when Hertzog resigned from politics in 1940, following the rejection of his motion for equity with English-speakers by the fervent Nationalists of Malan. Followers of Hertzog then formed the *Afrikanerparty* with Havenga as the leader. Consequently, a severely divided and fragmented Afrikaner nation went to the voting polls in 1948. Apart from a substantial number of Afrikaners supporting Smuts's victorious United Party in coalition with the Labour Party and the Dominion Party, Afrikaners were also represented in Malan's HNP, Havenga's *Afrikanerparty* and Oswald Pirow's *Nuwe Orde* (New Order), although the latter two parties won no seats in parliament. In 1947, Malan's HNP agreed with Havenga's *Afrikanerparty* not to oppose each other in the coming 1948 elections - a strategy which brought them victory.

<sup>26</sup> Moodie writes that it was with some surprise that he found that these three issues which he had identified were exactly the same as those outlined in the FAK journal *Inspan* in a post-electoral issue in June 1948 (Moodie 1975:238, fn.10).

<sup>27</sup> As Moodie (1975:249) points out, the issue of colour had been a major factor in every election since 1915. It appeared to be especially critical in the 1924 and 1948 elections because, on both of these occasions, Smuts had been in power and there were doubts about his steadfastness on issues of colour.

apartheid was contested in the ranks of this party<sup>28</sup>. A group consisting of Afrikaner intellectuals, teachers, lawyers, clerics etc. wanted 'total segregation', while another group in the AHI (*Afrikaanse Handels Instituut/ Afrikaans Commerce Institute*) and the SAAU (*Suid-Afrikaanse Landbou Unie/ South African Agricultural Union*) wanted what they termed 'practical apartheid'. With reference to the latter grouping, suffice it to say that - as Posel points out - they represented the commercial and agricultural spheres and quite simply recognised the need for Black labour in white areas - especially on the farms where a labour crisis was deepening. In opposition to them, the first group, consisting especially of *dominees* and *ex-dominees*-turned-politicians from the ranks of the NGK, supported total segregation because of the supposed moral and Christian content of the doctrine - 'the native' (meaning anyone non-white) was theoretically not deprived of any opportunities or rights, s/he can have total freedom - but in his/her own territory. Bloomberg (1989:218-226) terms this concept of total segregation 'vertical apartheid', opposing it to 'horizontal apartheid'. According to him, vertical apartheid denotes total development within total segregation, in contrast to horizontal apartheid, which grants only limited rights and freedom. As Moodie (1975:263) suggests, the major premises of the concept of total segregation were therefore Christian-National: it was argued not to be a case of racism, but of ethnic and cultural differences which necessitated separation<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Posel takes issue with those authors (such as A Hepple's *Verwoerd*) who see apartheid as a policy developing according to a preconceived blueprint, or corresponding to a grand plan. She maintains that studies which represent apartheid's development as cumulative - each step building on the successes of the last - '[assume] that resistance (within and beyond the state) to the strategies of Apartheid's planners played little role in fashioning the contours of state policy. Rather, the effect of opposition is treated as having been largely limited to delaying or complicating the implementation of policies already prescribed by "the grand design" ' (Posel 1991:4). Likewise, J Lazar (1993), in an article on Verwoerd and the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA), pleads for a responsive and flexible notion of apartheid.

<sup>29</sup> The group subscribing to total segregation argued shrewdly that it would be immoral not to give the vote to Africans if they were in the majority in the cities, and therefore Africans should be encouraged to move into areas governed by their own people. In addition, increasing social opposition from Africans in the cities was also feared. Strict influx control over Africans into the cities seemed to offer one solution to this dilemma, while a systematic reduction of white dependence on African labour through accelerated mechanization, offered another (Posel 1991:50-57).

However, while the HNP might have been confronted with, and divided over<sup>30</sup>, the ideal of total segregation and the reality of white dependence on Black labour, their colour policy for the 1948 elections basically boiled down to the maintenance of power for the white race. In addition, Malan and the HNP's seemingly unyielding position on '*volkseie*' education and on the perils of communism<sup>31</sup>, won the HNP considerable support. Malan also played down the Republican issue in a deliberate effort not to estrange the marginal voter (Moodie 1975:249). These electoral tactics on the part of the HNP, together with the unpopularity of the Smuts government due to its efforts to enforce dual medium education and its slack attitude towards communism and racial integration, resulted in the victory of the HNP-Afrikanerparty alliance with a majority of five seats. Smuts resigned and DF Malan became prime-minister, appointing a cabinet made up entirely of Afrikaners.

It was in this climate that the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument took place at a time when the notion of the unity of the Afrikaner *volk* was at its strongest.

### 1.3.2 The inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument: validating Afrikaner power

The Voortrekker Monument - its conception and inauguration - is another meaningful context which must have played a role in moulding the version of the Trek Coetzer advanced in the

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<sup>30</sup> Malan appointed the Sauer commission to look into the confusion about a racial policy. Whereas their report of 1947 is usually accepted as the blueprint for apartheid, Posel (1991:57-60) demonstrates that the absence of a hegemonic concept of apartheid is already manifest here: according to Posel, the Sauer report tried to combine both strands of apartheid - it spoke of total segregation while simultaneously acknowledging the impracticability of such a policy. Posel argues that the report was at once contradictory, because it wove together strands from mutually exclusive conceptions of apartheid, and ambiguous, because it did not choose between either of them. Malan realized that total segregation would be impracticable especially in the light of the labour crisis on the white farms, but it was Verwoerd who would eventually reconcile these two conflicting concepts of apartheid by regarding practical apartheid as a short term solution, with total segregation as a long term goal. In his electoral campaign, however, Malan took a strong stand on the matter of apartheid. He contrasted his party's policy with that of the UP which wanted no assimilation of white and black and yet proclaimed racial co-existence and granted rights for Africans on a municipal level. In a summary of the Sauer report it was said that the UP's policy of integration will lead to national suicide while the NP's policy of apartheid will safeguard the white race.

<sup>31</sup> Moodie (1975:251) explains that 'since communism advocated racial equality and was envisaged as the inevitable concomitant of British imperialist liberal capitalism, anti-communism combined both anti-British and anti-black sentiments of the civil religion'.

Voortrekker tapestries. On the one hand, the political agenda evidenced in the speeches at the inauguration, in the ceremony itself, and in the architecture of the new monument, provided Coetzer with ideological input, while on the other hand, his artistic involvement in the historic frieze inside the Monument afforded him a visual source for the concept of the Great Trek developed in the tapestries.

On 16 December 1949, the Voortrekker Monument was at last inaugurated, 11 years to the day after the laying of the foundation stone during the centennial year of the Great Trek. As in 1938, Afrikaners in their thousands travelled to Pretoria to witness the climax of a process which had begun in 1931 when the FAK formed the *Sentrale Nasionale Monumente Komitee* (Central National Monuments Committee; hereafter SNMK) to co-ordinate all the disparate efforts aimed at erecting monuments in honour of the Voortrekkers. Despite the prevailing depression, £350 000 was not regarded as too much for the erection of a Voortrekker monument because it was argued that

*Die Voortrekkers alleen het net tot by Bloedrivier uit hul skamele getalle meer as 500 waardevolle Blanke menselewens vir ons hede en toekoms afgelê. Kan geld van vandag vir die lewens, opofferinge en dade ter beveiliging van ons [die Afrikaner] beskaving en blankedom betaal? (Botha 1952:17).*

(Up to Blood River only, the Voortrekkers alone sacrificed more than 500 cherished white lives out of their meagre numbers for our present situation and our future. Can today's money pay for their lives, offerings and deeds with which they safeguarded [the Afrikaner's] civilisation and [the Afrikaner's] white nation?)

It was further argued that the commemoration of, and gratitude towards the Voortrekkers had to be the primary aim of the proposed structure. It was for this reason that the erection of a monument was decided on, rather than a hospital or some other charitable institution. The funding of the monument was facilitated, on the one hand, by the Smuts-Hertzog coalition government who offered in 1935 to contribute on a £ for £ basis to the fund, and, on the other, by the selling of special postage stamps (*Voortrekkermonument seëls*) to the general



public<sup>32</sup> (Jansen 1949:37-38). After major consultations and deliberations, Pretoria was selected as the best site for the monument because, as Lombard (1954:27-28), a member of the sub-committee who had to decide on the location of the monument, put it: 'here the Voortrekkers temporarily achieved their aims after years of wandering and the train of the events known as the "Great Trek" reached its culmination'.

The design and symbolism of the Voortrekker Monument, the official programme of the 1949 inauguration ceremony, as well as the ceremony itself and the speeches delivered at the inauguration, boast some of the most blatant instances of racism that ever occurred in the apartheid era. In the interpretation of the architecture, in the printed programme, and in the public orations, apartheid was preached and practised. The newly-elected National Party used this opportunity to validate its apartheid policies by making a simplistic equation between Christianity, civilisation and the survival of the white race. The theme of the Voortrekkers as 'God's Chosen People', which was used in 1938 to emphasise the virtue of the Afrikaner *volk*'s ancestors, was now developed to justify the racial policies of the new government. At the opening ceremony of the Monument, prime-minister DF Malan praised the Voortrekkers (and by implication the Afrikaners) who had to fight for the preservation of the white race and Christianity in the face of barbarism and attacks from the outside. He concluded by urging Afrikaners to 'turn back' to their *volk*, their families, their Christian way of life and ultimately, to their God (Malan's address reproduced in Botha 1952:271-274).

The inauguration ceremony was also marked by the arrival of dispatch riders who, on the initiative of the ATKV, had travelled to Pretoria from all corners of South Africa to deliver messages ('*volksboodschappe*') from various towns and institutions to the Monument on 16 December. According to MC Botha (1952), the four main themes of these messages were

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<sup>32</sup> These *Voortrekkermonument-seëls* were on sale from 1933 until 1938, when Coetzer's *Eeufees-* (Centenary-) and *Herdenkingseëls* (Commemorative stamps) were printed.

about the unity of the Afrikaner *volk*, the vigour and well-being of the *volk*, the importance of that which is true to the Afrikaners - such as their religion, language, descent, whiteness (*'Blankheid'*) and their desire for sovereignty - and finally, about their positive and expectant attitude towards the future. Both in DF Malan's speech, with its emphasis on turning back to the *volk* and its god, and in the various messages received, the request was that Afrikaners should once again - as in 1938 - assert their collective identity by re-defining what they held dear as a *volk*. Of course, unlike 1938, Afrikaners now had concrete proof of their nationhood, embodied in the newly-elected Afrikaner government.

This presupposed homogeneity of Afrikaner society is one message which - according to the architect, Gerard Moerdyk - is embedded in the symbolism of the Voortrekker Monument. In the inaugurational programme, Moerdyk (1949:43-55) wrote a lengthy treatise on the meaning and symbolism of the Voortrekker Monument, a piece of writing which reveals his - and most probably his employers' - preoccupation with race. Moerdyk places the whole structure of the Monument, with its adornments, in the context of what he terms the 'great civilising deed' which the Voortrekkers executed, namely, the 'settling and securing of a white civilisation in the interior of South Africa' (Moerdyk 1949:45). Suffice it to name but a few examples: the statue of a Voortrekker woman with two children at the entrance to the Monument is said to symbolise white South Africa (fig. 18), while the black wildebeest in the wall on either side of this statue symbolise the ever-present dangers threatening white civilisation in South Africa. Above the main entrance, the head of a buffalo as a symbol of defence guards against all inimical elements from outside, while a laager of 64 wagons carved out of synthetic granite symbolically wards off, as Moerdyk (1949:45) put it, 'everything which clashes with the Voortrekker's beliefs and ideals, from this altar of the Afrikaner' (fig. 19). It is interesting to note that some of the most explicit references to Afrikaner ownership of the land and its people, are toned down in a later official guide to the Monument, published in 1954. In the 1949 programme, Moerdyk speaks of the intention to make South Africa a *'witmansland'* (literally 'a land of white people') while in the 1954

Figure 18: Voortrekker woman with children

Sculpture by Anton Van Wouw,  
at entrance to Monument

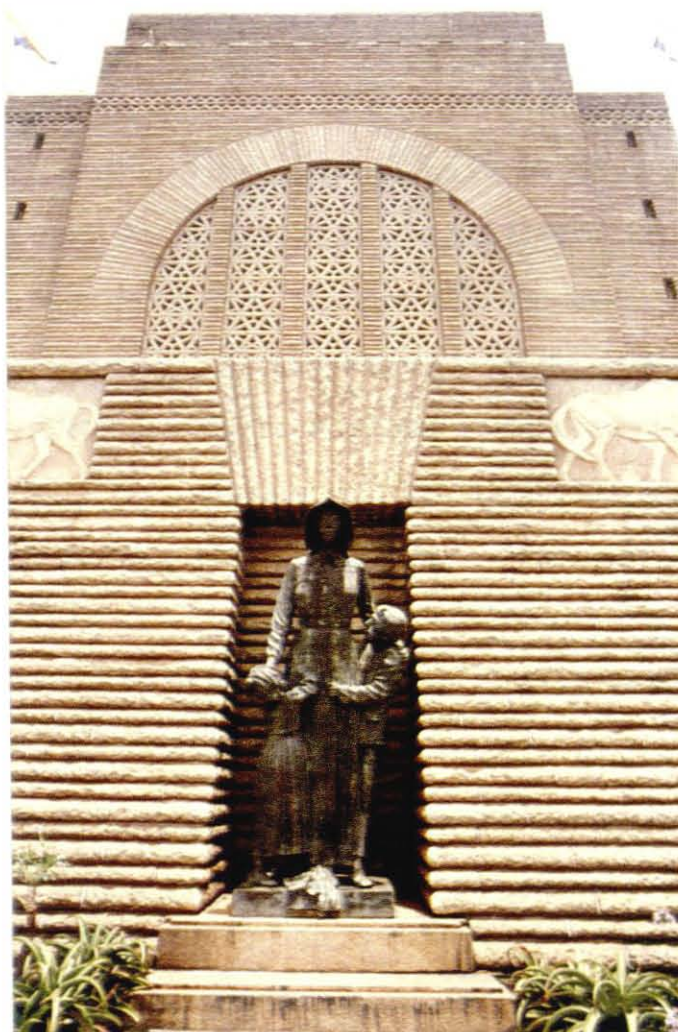


Figure 19: 'The Altar of the Afrikaners'

The Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria





official guide, this reference is omitted, possibly because the 1949 text was too explicitly racist.

Although it is not my intention to focus on the meaning and symbolism of the Monument itself, the 27 panels of the marble frieze which line the walls of the so-called Hall of Heroes inside the Monument are important, because of their affinities with the tapestries. Significantly enough, Gustav Preller was on the sub-committee which selected the incidents depicted in the marble frieze, and WH Coetzer appears to have designed the initial sketches. While Delmont (1993:91) remarks that one of the sculptors of the frieze, Hennie Potgieter, claimed that they did not use Coetzer's sketches, but only his extensive knowledge on Africana subjects, Nico Coetzee asserts that

although the four sculptors [who worked on the frieze] did not follow Coetzer's design slavishly, they omitted his design for a symbolical panel only (Coetzee 1988:183).<sup>33</sup>

The exact nature of Coetzer's involvement in the making of the marble frieze is therefore unclear, but there are obvious similarities between the portrayal of identical historical events in the frieze and the tapestries.

For instance, the first panel in the marble frieze entitled 'Voortrekkers leaving the Cape Colony, 1935' (fig. 20) bears noticeable compositional parallels to the second panel of the tapestries entitled 'The Exodus' (fig. 2), which similarly depicts the departure from the Cape Colony. Despite the flatter format of the marble frieze and the absence of colour, in both these panels the activities of the Voortrekkers is represented in the foreground, followed by departing ox-wagons in the middle-ground and a very similar depiction of mountains in the background. Household utensils such as flat-irons and wagon-kists are also present in both panels, most probably due to Coetzer's influence, as he went to great lengths to study the objects and utensils used by the Voortrekkers throughout his life.

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<sup>33</sup> Coetzee obtained this information from an unpublished thesis by A de Beer *Die Lewe en die Werk van die skilder WH Coetzer en sy Kultuurhistoriese Betekenis*. University of Pretoria (1969).



Figure 20: 'Voortrekkers leaving the Cape Colony, 1835'

Panel 1 of the marble frieze inside the Voortrekker Monument



Figure 21: 'Matabele attack on the Voortrekkers at Vegkop, 1836'

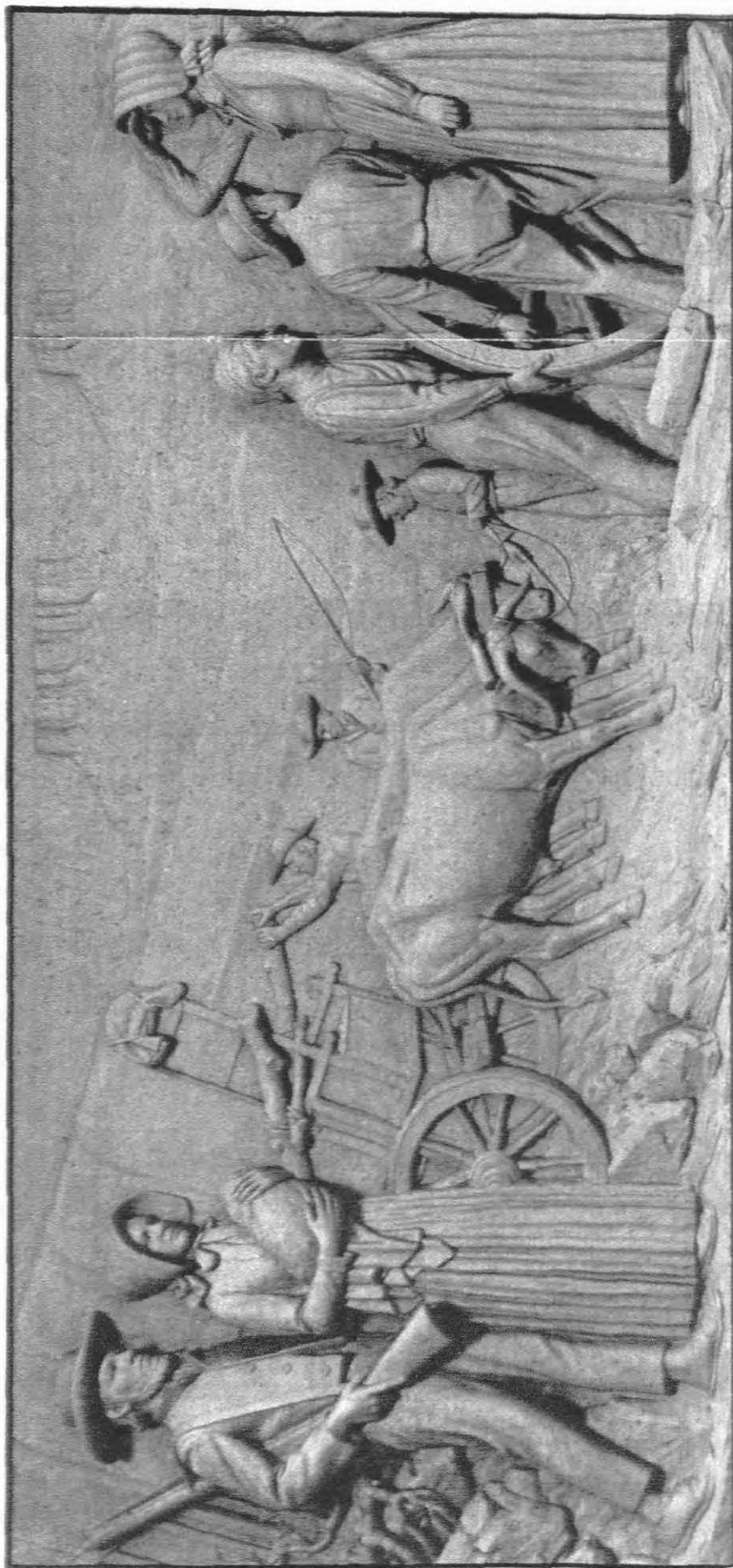
Panel 5 of the marble frieze inside the Voortrekker Monument





Figure 22: 'Crossing the Drakensberg Mountains to Natal'

Panel 11 of the marble frieze inside the Voortrekker Monument



Furthermore, in panel 4 of the tapestries (fig. 4) and panel 5 of the marble frieze (fig. 21), the battle at Vegkop is portrayed using a similar composition with wagons in the background and Voortrekkers in the foreground. Women loading guns, casting bullets and tending the wounded are present in both the frieze and the tapestry panel and are depicted in an almost identical manner. Stylistic analogies are also present in panel 11 of the marble frieze (fig. 22) and panel 8 of the tapestries (fig. 8), which both depict the crossing of the Drakensberg. Interestingly, however, the depiction of the Bloukransmoord and Blood River seem quite different in the tapestry panels and the frieze. In the depiction of the battle of Blood River in the frieze, advance-guard Boers who went out to confront the Zulus head-on, are portrayed (fig. 17), while in the tapestry panel the laager is depicted high in the background with the attacking Zulus in the foreground (fig. 14). Given an earlier portrayal of this battle by Coetzer - reproduced in a 1938 edition of a popular magazine *Die Huisgenoot gedenkuitgawe* (1938:132) - which corresponds to his later tapestry panel, it is unlikely that Coetzer had any hand in this panel of the marble frieze. In fact, the depiction of the Blood River battle in the marble frieze seems quite unorthodox, since most representations of this event - both literary and visual - seem to stress the deep ravine between the Boers and the attacking Zulus, as portrayed in Coetzer's work.

In conclusion, while the 1949 inaugural ceremony with all its paraphernalia furnished Coetzer with ideological input, his role in at least some of the designs for the historical frieze inside the Monument, also provided him with an opportunity to formulate a visual conception of the Trek on which he could draw in 1952 for the design of the tapestries.

### 1.3.3 The Jan van Riebeeck Festival: consolidating white power

My concerns in this section are summarised very succinctly by Rassool and Witz (1993:449) when they write that

[t]he tenuous electoral victory of 1948, coupled with the limited framework of political support afforded by Afrikaner nationalism, required the power base of the state to be broadened. This meant promoting an accompanying wider white settler

nationalism, whose right to rule stemmed from its self-proclaimed role as the bearer of 'civilisation', a role which started with its colonial occupation in 1652.

The National Party saw in the Van Riebeeck festival a golden opportunity to gain wider support for its policy of racial segregation. The severe opposition to amalgamation between English and Afrikaners that had led in 1934 to a split in the National Party after Hertzog's coalition with the United Party, was now something of the past. Gone were the days when the English were seen as the primary threat to Afrikaner nationalism. Instead, the 'black peril' was the main cause for concern in the minds of both English and Afrikaners. In this context, the image of Van Riebeeck became, in 1952, a symbol 'not of the Afrikaner nation...but of white rule as a whole' (Rassool and Witz 1993:449)<sup>34</sup>. In contrast to the few isolated commemorative festivals in honour of Van Riebeeck held prior to 1952, which signified things such as 'reformed Christianity, Dutch-South Africa relations, *volksplanting*' (Rassool and Witz 1993:451), Rassool and Witz (1993:451) argue that

[i]t was only after the Second World War that Van Riebeeck acquired the singular, almost unanimous, symbolism of white settler power. Based on many of the building blocks derived from previous usages, Van Riebeeck was qualitatively transformed from a person involved in historical processes to an icon of national history.

Despite Rassool and Witz's (1993:449) contention that the icon of Van Riebeeck was used exclusively to symbolise white power in 1952, I want to argue that Van Riebeeck was, on this occasion, still being honoured by Afrikaners for the special role that he was presumed to have played in the formation of the Afrikaner *volk*. For example, in the ranks of the NGK 'the occasion [of the 1952 Van Riebeeck festival] was seen as having enormous religious significance, for it was Van Riebeeck who first established Calvinism in South Africa' (Bloomberg 1989:218). And the connection between Calvinism and specifically Afrikaner culture has certainly been an intimate one in Afrikaner history:

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<sup>34</sup> With this claim Rassool and Witz challenge the position expressed by both Shamil Jeppie (1990:147-150) in his MA thesis 'Aspects of Popular Culture and Class Expression in Inner Cape Town, circa 1939-1959' and Albert Grundlingh, in an article entitled '*Die Mite van die "Volksvader"*' (*Vrye Weekblad*, 5/4/91) who both see Van Riebeeck as a symbol exclusively of the Afrikaner *volk* (Rassool and Witz 1993:449).

Calvinism has permeated Afrikaner culture and thought patterns: it has always provided the four walls within which other conceptual systems have evolved; it was the cradle in which Nationalism was born; it provided the lens through which Afrikaners saw their own awakened race-consciousness (Bloomberg 1989:100).

In 1952, the equation of Christianity with civilisation, which was frequently made by Afrikaners (as with the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument), was extended and somewhat altered to incorporate the whole white nation. In this process, the Van Riebeeck icon was appropriated

to establish a dichotomy in South Africa between 'civilisation' and economic progress, on the one hand, and 'primitiveness' and social backwardness, on the other (Rassool and Witz 1993:455).

This dichotomy was strikingly portrayed by way of a moving pageant at the opening of the festival<sup>35</sup>. The emphasis of the whole festival was on re-conciliation between Afrikaners and English, after fears were expressed by the Rand Daily Mail, the Anglo-American Corporation and the Transvaal Chamber of Mines that the pageant might 'display a hostile British imperialism persecuting the Afrikaner nation' and that the festival might be used 'as a "political demonstration", a "second Voortrekker Monument" ' (Rassool and Witz 1993:456 quoting from 'Report for the Festival Fair Committee on the Political Aspect of the Transvaal', 1951, vol. 339). Indeed, hostilities between Afrikaners and English were played down as the 'central theme of the pageant asserted the development of settler co-operation in the founding of the South African nation' (Rassool and Witz 1993:458). To symbolise the harmonious relationship between the two principle white races in the country, one float depicted the incident when, in 1837, a Bible was given to the Trek leader Jacobus Uys by an English merchant, William Rowland Thompson<sup>36</sup>. Rassool and Witz single out two more significant floats in the pageant: one entitled 'Africa dark and unknown' which

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<sup>35</sup> A detailed discussion of the pageant can be found in Rassool and Witz (1993) and of the accompanying festival fair on the foreshore of Cape Town in Witz (1993).

<sup>36</sup> This same event is portrayed in panel 2 of the Voortrekker Monument marble frieze, described in the text accompanying the panel as '[The Settlers] fought against the Xhosas alongside the Voortrekkers' (Heymans 1986:10). Hence, three years prior to 1952, the idea of a united front of white against black is already propagated.

aimed to justify processes of white settlement in South Africa, and another entitled 'Darkest Africa' which likewise stressed the 'benefits' of white civilisation (1993:457)<sup>37</sup>.

In conclusion, then, the 1952 festival emphasised the presumed blessings of white settlement and banished all 'non-whites' to the fringes of a hegemonic and white rendition of the history of South Africa. In addition, the Van Riebeeck celebrations revealed a very significant shift in the political composition of South Africa. While in 1938, at the centenary celebrations, Afrikaners were trying to define themselves in opposition to all foreign forces which included English-speakers, by 1952 they were more concerned with the issue of race and welcomed English-speakers into their laager, in an effort to locate power in the hands of white South Africa.

<sup>37</sup> Rassool and Witz (1993) and Witz (1993) also trace the considerable resistance which the Van Riebeeck festival evoked. The defiance campaign of the ANC against emerging apartheid legislation was launched on 6 April 1952. In addition, the federal bodies affiliated to the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) organised political opposition to the festival which took the form of non-collaboration and the boycotting of the festival. SM Molema, in the opening address at the annual conference of the South African Indian Congress in 1952, eloquently expressed what was probably on the minds of many people. I quote from Rassool and Witz (1993:463): 'Molema reminded the audience that "the dominant fact of South African history...(was) that every monument of the white man perpetuates the memory of the annihilation of some black community". The Van Riebeeck festival, he insisted, was a "frenzy of self adulation (with whites) preparing to embrace each other and shake their bloody hands in commemoration of their three hundred years of rapine and bloodshed" '. (Rassool and Witz take these quotes from Molema's 'Opening address' 25/1/1952 in Karis and Carter 1977 From Protest to Challenge, vol. II:477-480 and vol. IV:94-95).

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#### 1.4 The Ideology of the *Volksmoeder*

In 1952 Dr. WA Nicol, administrator of Transvaal and chairperson of the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument, was approached by the *Vrou-en Moederbeweging van die ATKV* (hereafter VMB) with a proposal to make a tapestry about the Great Trek for the Voortrekker Monument. Nicol responded by suggesting that, since the historic marble frieze in the Hall of Heroes inside the Monument was said to depict the traditional male spheres of Trek life, namely the military and public political spheres, such a tapestry should focus on the role played by women in the Trek. As a result, it was decided that the tapestries would focus on the domestic and cultural spheres of Trek life - those areas which were unproblematically assumed to be the domain of women. This facile association of women with the domestic sphere was in many ways the result of the ideology of the *volksmoeder* which dominated Afrikaners' perceptions of Afrikaner women throughout the early 20th century. According to this ideology the Afrikaner woman was confined to the domestic sphere, trapped in her role as the mother not only of the private household, but more importantly, of the 'public household' - the *volk*. As Brink (1990:273) puts it

in terms of the *volksmoeder* concept, the Afrikaner woman was depicted not only as the cornerstone of the household but also as a central unifying force within Afrikanerdom and, as such, was expected to fulfil a political role as well.

Over the years, this political role, which the symbol of the *volksmoeder* had to fulfil, changed - or rather expanded - to comply with shifting definitions of Afrikanerhood, incorporating a range of characteristics such as patience in the face of suffering (in 1913) and racial purity (in 1949). Evidently, then, like Gustav Preller, the *volksmoeder* discourse could be regarded as a factor in and influence on the consciousness of many Afrikaners until at least as late as 1952, when the Voortrekker tapestries were commissioned.

Thus far in this chapter I have identified certain discourses which probably influenced Coetzer to represent the Great Trek in a specific way and following a specific sequence. I now want to turn to yet another relevant discourse informing Coetzer's perception of the

Afrikaner past, namely that of the *volksmoeder*. In the second chapter of this dissertation, I argue that when one examines the depiction of Afrikaner women in the tapestries, it is obvious that the prevalent perception of Afrikaner women in terms of the characteristics of the *volksmoeder* also made a distinct impression on Coetzer. But in order to argue this claim convincingly, I will focus in this chapter on the history of the *volksmoeder* discourse.

In my exploration of this history, which implies examining the construction, articulation and changing role of the *volksmoeder* discourse, I will draw on the work of feminist historians who have, in recent years, focused on this discourse in an attempt to redress the silence about the role of women in Afrikaner history. The ideal of the *volksmoeder* is an important site to start a search for seemingly absent Afrikaner women, because it was within the limited bounds of this ideal that Afrikaner women could and did identify closely with the project of a unified Afrikaner *volk*<sup>38</sup>. For this reason it is crucial to acknowledge Afrikaner women's agency in the construction of the *volksmoeder* ideal.

#### 1.4.1 The origins of the *volksmoeder* ideal

Most historians (Gaitskell and Unterhalter 1989, Brink 1990, LM Kruger 1991, McClintock 1993) find tentative origins of the *volksmoeder* discourse at the turn of the century during and after the South African War (1899-1902). Brink (1990:276-277) notes that the image of the courageous Voortrekker women, who in 1843 were determined to cross the Drakensberg barefoot rather than submit to British rule, was invoked during the war by General Smuts at a Day of the Covenant celebration to inspire male combatants. However, this image of

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<sup>38</sup> As I will indicate in this section, the ways in which Afrikaner women identified with and took part in the project of Afrikaner nationalism, seem to coincide with what Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1989), in the introduction to their book on women and Nationalism, have identified as the five major ways in which 'women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices. These are:

- (a.) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
- (b.) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
- (c.) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
- (d.) as signifier of ethnic/national differences - as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;
- (e.) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles' (1989:7).

strong, defiant and active Afrikaner (Voortrekker) women taking part in the Trek of 1838, was sidelined after the war in favour of the silent, suffering, defenceless and passive women who patiently endured the anguish of concentration camps during the war - all for the sake of their *volk*. As Gaitskell and Unterhalter (1989:60) put it

after 1902, Afrikaner motherhood is exalted as saintly in suffering, admired for stoicism in victimisation, its strength an inspiration to the rest of the defeated nation. The emphasis is on nobility, passivity, virtuous nurturing and protection of children.

The sufferings of the Boer women became institutionalised with the unveiling of the *Vrouemonument* (Women's Memorial) outside Bloemfontein in 1913 (fig. 23). This monument had been erected in homage to the more than 26 000 Afrikaner women and children that had died in the war. Here, the reality of strong Afrikaner women running farms in the absence of their husbands and actively opposing British soldiers in the South African War, was successfully suppressed. As McClintock (1993:72) puts it

[at the *Vrouemonument*] women's martial role as fighters and farmers was purged of its decorously militant potential, and replaced by the figure of the lamenting mother with babe in arms.

The erection of this memorial was a national effort initiated by ex-president MT Steyn in 1907 with the help of, amongst others, Emily Hobhouse, who did much during the war to bring the suffering of Afrikaner women to the attention of the British public, and was hence regarded as a friend and ally of the Afrikaners. She was also asked to present an opening address at the memorial, which was eventually read in her absence, due to illness (Brink 1990:278).

LM Kruger (1991:142-143) argues that, in her speech, Hobhouse stressed womanhood rather than motherhood and holds that although 'the idea [of the *volksmoeder*] might well have concretised in this context', we do not yet 'find a distinctive *volksmoeder* discourse or even a special stress on the idea of mothering in the proceedings at the monument'. This might be true of the verbal proceedings, but I want to argue that in the visual features of the Memorial, emphasis was explicitly placed on mothering. At the centre of the built structure

Figure 23: The Women's Memorial, Bloemfontein 1913

Sculpture by Anton Van Wouw



Figure 24: ‘Nooientjie van die Onderveld’

Sculpture by Anton Van Wouw;  
used as cover for *Die Boerevrou*



of the Memorial is a Van Wouw sculpture-group of 1912-1913 depicting a seated woman holding an emaciated child with another woman standing next to them. It is my contention that suffering motherhood, rather than womanhood in general, is central to this depiction<sup>39</sup>. Here at the Memorial, moreover, the mothering of children was expanded to become the mothering of the *volk*. Hence, due to its context, this Van Wouw sculpture can be seen as one of the earliest examples of the visual tradition of the *volksmoeder*.

More or less at the same time of, and just after the unveiling of the *Vrouemonument*, another area of public life became a much used (and abused) forum for a further formulation of the *volksmoeder* ideal, namely popular literature and magazines. Elsabé Brink (1990:279) singles out two Afrikaner men, the poet Totius and his brother-in-law, Willem Postma, in whose work 'there is a clear convergence between the development of the ideal of the *volksmoeder* and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism'<sup>40</sup>. In 1918, Postma published *Die Boerevrou. Moeder van haar Volk* (The Boer Woman, Mother of her Nation). Brink (1990:280) argues, with reference to this work, that

for the first time the Boer woman's role as mother and central focus of her family was expanded to include the concept of Boer women as mothers of the nation

- although, as I have demonstrated, the visual depiction of this ideal dates to 1913, i.e. five years earlier. Another book which played a significant role in the development of the *volksmoeder* ideal, published in 1921 by Eric Stockenström and entitled *Die Vrou in die Geskiedenis van die Hollands-Afrikaanse Volk* (The Woman in the History of the Dutch-Afrikaanse volk), outlines the history of the role played by women in the Afrikaner *volk*.

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<sup>39</sup> Emily Hobhouse was apparently instrumental in the final design for this sculpture group. Van Wouw's first maquette was rejected by her and his subsequent second attempt was criticised for portraying a child which was according to Hobhouse 'asleep, not dead' (Van Reenen 1970:105).

<sup>40</sup> Brink (1990:281-283) also discusses literary works by women of this time but notes that they did not promote an ideal vision of womanhood. They were concerned, rather, with the real lives of women: Marie du Toit, sister of Totius wrote a book in 1921 entitled *Vrou en Feminist - Of iets oor die Vroue-Vraagstuk* (Woman and Feminist - Or something about the Question of Women), ME Rothmann wrote a very realistic study about the plight of poor Afrikaner women (1935), and Hansi Pollak investigated working conditions of white (mainly Afrikaner) women on the Witwatersrand (1932). However, these works never made a major impact on the popular perception of Afrikaner women as created by the Nationalists.

Brink (1990:280) writes that these authors - Totius, Postma, Stockenström - added such qualities as 'a sense of religion, bravery... housewifeliness (*huismoederlikheid*), nurturance of talents, integrity, virtue and the setting of an example to others' to the already existing image of the *volksmoeder*. This *volksmoeder* ideal was gleaned from an amalgam of characteristics taken from both the courageous Voortrekker women of the mid-19th century who had travelled into the interior, and their descendants who suffered in the concentration camps during the South African War of 1899-1902.

Up to this point it would seem that women served merely as passive symbols or objects to inspire the nation, but Afrikaner women began to identify with, and then to define and refine the ideal of the *volksmoeder*. Gaitskell and Unterhalter (1989:62) write, with reference to the period from 1914 to 1948, that Afrikaner motherhood was 'far more active and mobilising' than in the years preceding it, and importantly, that 'the home [was] focused on as women's appropriate arena for fostering Afrikaner national identity through their child-rearing and domestic responsibilities'<sup>41</sup>. This is illustrated by Isabel Hofmeyr (1987) who focuses on the role women played in educating their children in Afrikaner culture by reading Afrikaans books and magazines<sup>42</sup>. Afrikaner women further influenced the ideal of the *volksmoeder* by raising and educating their children in, what they regarded as, a 'truly

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<sup>41</sup> Gaitskell and Unterhalter (1989:60) distinguish between three different representations of Afrikaner motherhood which, according to them, correspond to 'a changing conception of race and nation': in 1902 'the Afrikaner nation mourns as a suffering victim'; then in 1914, with the formation of the National Party 'the nation mobilises to redress political and economical disadvantage'; and finally, in 1948, the Afrikaner nation attains state power.

<sup>42</sup> Hofmeyr (1987) focuses on the production of a body of Afrikaans literature in the development of a nationalist discourse. She traces this development from 1870, with the formation of the *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (Fellowship of True Afrikaners) in Paarl, to the *Afrikaanse Taalgenootskap*, formed in 1905 in the Transvaal under the auspices of Gustav Preller. The latter group launched a popular Afrikaans magazine, *Die Brandwag* (The Sentinel), in 1910 and this was followed by another magazine in 1913, *Die Huisgenoot* (The Family Companion). These two magazines 'fabricated a tremendous cult around certain literary figures' and was used as a forum to familiarise the *volk* with its writers and poets (Hofmeyr 1987:109). As Hofmeyr illustrates, much of the fiction published was historical, focusing on the war and consequently 'within the atmosphere of heightened historical interest, certain people set to work to stitch together an "Afrikaner" history which could become a myth of national origin' (1987:109). As Hofmeyr (1987, 1988) shows, Gustav Preller was, of course, instrumental in the elaboration of this Afrikaner past, and Afrikaner women were very much responsible for disseminating and reproducing this information.

Afrikaner' way. In their eager attempts to be loyal Afrikaner women, their endorsement of the *volksmoeder* ideal was complete and unquestioning.

One area where women were particularly active in defining, refining and describing the ideal of the *volksmoeder* was in the pages of the Afrikaans monthly magazine, *Die Boerevrou*<sup>43</sup>. This is demonstrated by LM Kruger (1991) who has made a detailed study of the development of the *volksmoeder* discourse in this magazine, from its inception in 1919 to its demise in 1931. The debate about the cover of *Die Boerevrou*, a photograph of Anton Van Wouw's sculpture, *Nooientjie van die Onderveld* (Girl from the Lowveld) (fig. 24), serves as one example of how Afrikaner women actively contributed to the construction of their public image. As Kruger (1991:211) puts it:

For the modern reader the meaning of this symbol seems obvious: the costume (especially the *kappie*/bonnet) clearly signifies the traditional Afrikaner woman in history. For the contemporary readers, however, the meaning of the symbol was not yet that obvious. They themselves were still involved in the process of constituting the meaning of the symbol and did so by questioning it and reinterpreting it.

The responses to the cover photograph were diverse - some readers disliked it because the passive posture of the *Nooientjie* did not, in their eyes, represent the true Afrikaner woman's active day, others because the clothes of the *Nooientjie* seemed old-fashioned as women were not wearing *kappies* any more. Those who approved of it did so because, to them, the *Nooientjie* seemed 'peaceful, assertive, serious, strong, hopeful, satisfied, pure, simple and humble' (Kruger 1991:212) - true *volksmoeder* characteristics. This incident is significant because women were illustrating their sanctioning of the *volksmoeder* ideal by debating it and specifying what would later become the standard visual representation of the *volksmoeder* ideal - the woman in traditional garb and bonnet.

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<sup>43</sup> The title *Die Boerevrou* can be translated in many ways. Literally it means *The farm woman* but seeing that 'boer' was used interchangeably with 'Afrikaner', it does denote an ethnic identity as well as in 'the Afrikaner woman'. Finally, it can also mean 'the wife of the Boer/Afrikaner'. These meanings are, of course, not mutually exclusive.



Whereas LM Kruger (1991) examines the perceptions and attitudes of the readers of *Die Boerevrou*, Elsabé Brink (1987a, 1987b, 1990) explores the role middle-class and also working-class women played in the construction of the *volksmoeder* ideal. She focuses on Afrikaner working-class women in the clothing industry in Johannesburg in the 1920s and 1930s, and their interaction with the (predominantly) middle-class women of the *Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie* (South African Women's Organisation; hereafter SAVF), who were involved in charity work. As far as the SAVF is concerned, Brink (1990:287) notes that,

as Eisenberg (1987) has indicated, during the inter-war years the [SAVF] had strong links with Afrikaner nationalist organisations, including the Broederbond, the Dutch Reformed Church and its sister churches,

and hence these women were

co-opted into a more narrowly nationalistic ideological framework [and] used the term *volksmoeder* to underpin their work on the welfare front with an ideologically acceptable base (Brink 1990:285).

It goes without saying that these women, in aligning themselves with the AB and the NGK, also advocated the ideals of racial purity and the dangers of miscegenation to which the *Broederbond* and the church were committed. As Brink (1990:287) puts it:

[The] middle-class perception of the 'degeneration' of the poor white and the imminent danger of fraternisation with non-whites coloured the attitude of the SAVF towards the recipients of its welfare activities.

The SAVF, in an effort to 'save' working women for the Afrikaner *volk*, erected hostels for low-paid girls, provided poor relief and health-care, and generally regarded poor Afrikaners as in need of charity and guidance. In this way they saw themselves, and acted as *volksmoeders* - women working in the service of the nation. For the women of the SAVF, the title of *volksmoeder* gave legitimacy to their roles as charity workers.

However, Brink (1990) also shows that the *volksmoeder* ideal became a contested one when working women appropriated the ideal and subsequently inscribed it with different content. They linked the historical image of the courageous barefooted Voortrekker women willing to travel over the Drakensberg, to their own 'struggles in an industrial environment' (Brink

1990:289). As Brink (1984) notes elsewhere, in their plays and writings directed at the members of the Garment Workers' Union (GWU), these working women drew on images of strong Voortrekker women as well as on women of the South African War to inspire their members to fight for better working conditions. For them, the ideal of the *volksmoeder* meant not necessarily nurturance and protection as it did for the women of the SAVF, but firmness, perseverance and action in adversity. Clearly, then, the *volksmoeder* ideal continued to be a contested one, but it was also one that Afrikaner women across the board wanted to identify with in their desire to be worthy women for the *volk*.

By 1938, the ideal of the *volksmoeder* was so firmly established as the sanctioned version of Afrikaner womanhood, that the *Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party* (GNP), in a calculated move, could use the opposite of the *volksmoeder* - the fallen woman - in synecdochal fashion as metaphor for the fall of the whole Afrikaner *volk*. Although he does not refer directly to the *volksmoeder* discourse, Jonathan Hyslop (1993), in an article focusing on the issue of mixed marriages in South Africa around the 1938 general elections, demonstrates that Malan and the GNP spelt out the consequences of Afrikaner women abandoning the *volksmoeder* ideal. In a poster reproduced in the major Afrikaans newspapers in May 1938, a young white woman in a simple dress - characteristic of working Afrikaner women of the period - sits outside a slum house with two children, one black and one white, while a black man slumps against the wall (fig. 25). The text in the poster reads

The hope of South Africa speaks to You and says 'Vote for The National Party and Protect my People (*Volk*) and my Posterity (*Nageslag*)' (Hyslop 1993:1).

The tacit but clear implication is that working-class women were prone to miscegenation and therefore posed a threat to the racial purity of the Afrikaner *volk*. As Hyslop (1993:10) explains 'by the 1930s, the perception that white-working class women were socially and sexually out of control was widely being expressed by the middle classes'. The GNP found

Figure 25: Electoral Poster used by the GNP, 1938

**DIE HOOP VAN SUID-AFRIKA**

SPREEK TOT  EN SÊ:

**„STEM VIR DIE**  
**Nasionale Party**  
**EN BESKERM MY VOLK EN MY NAGESLAG**

 **T E N** 

**GEMENGDE HUWELIKE** **SAMESMELTING**  
**Wat Die Verenigde Party Nie Wil** **EN** **MET VREEMDE ELEMENTE**  
**Belet Deur Wetgewing Nie** DIE PARTY VAN DIE VERENIGDE PARTY IS KUNST VAN LIEFDE EN VREDE

an easy target in working-class women and a gullible market in their middle-class voters to illustrate the advantages of the GNP's racial segregationist policy<sup>44</sup>.

It could be argued, therefore, that by 1938 the ideal of the *volksmoeder* was broadened to include the idea of racial difference, although, not at the expense of gender difference. As Hyslop (1993:7-8) indicates, a deepening crisis in gender relations was developing at this time:

In the process of industrialization, as young women were drawn into industrial labour in the cities, their new-found independence challenged the domestic authority of their parents.... The fact that the working woman was now outside the home was a standing threat to the generational authority of parents and the patriarchal authority of fathers and husbands.

Comparing the South African situation with that of the Southern United States in the era between 1890 and the First World War, Hyslop (1993:8) argues that,

for Afrikaner Nationalist leaders, the advocacy of the need to outlaw mixed marriages fulfilled a similar purpose to that which the rape scares and panics over the position of white factory girls fulfilled for right-wing Southern [American] demagogues.

The purpose of this was to control women, for,

[t]he Nationalist's apparent hysteria about 'mixed marriages' in fact performed an important role in re-establishing gender hierarchy. By portraying white women as sexually threatened by black men, Afrikaner males claimed the role of protectors of women, thereby reasserting their patriarchal control. (Hyslop 1993:4)

Gaining control over Afrikaner women was an important hidden agenda underlying the *volksmoeder* discourse. As McClintock puts it:

The icon of the *volksmoeder* is paradoxical. On the one hand, it recognises the power of (white) motherhood; on the other hand, it is a retrospective iconography of gender containment, containing women's mutinous powers within an iconography of domestic service (McClintock 1993:72).

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<sup>44</sup> The United Party's response to this electoral poster is worth noting for its shrewd political rhetoric. Hyslop (1993:2) writes that '[t]he UP...made great political capital of the idea that the National Party had insulted white women by the mere suggestion that they would marry black men. Their campaign was based in the assertion that white women did not need legislation to protect them against the wiles of black seducers'.

Created mostly by men at the turn of the century, but soon to be re-defined and re-interpreted by both men and women, the *volksmoeder* ideal was a prescriptive model which dictated to women how they should behave in order to be true Afrikaners. Paradoxically, this ideal vision of Afrikaner womanhood allowed women to be both active (like the courageous Voortrekker women) and passive (like the silent victims of the concentration camps) as long as they acted in the domestic sphere or took up tasks associated with what was considered to be traditional feminine qualities - like the nurturing aspect of welfare work. Praising the Afrikaner woman as '*Vrou en Moeder*' (Woman/Wife and Mother) was therefore a cunning way of suppressing her without being too obvious about it.

At the time of the centenary celebrations in 1938, the role of Afrikaner women as mothers of the *volk*, was deeply internalised in a series of orations which emphasised her role in the history of the Afrikaners, but especially in the Great Trek of 1838. At the outset of the commemorative Trek in Cape Town, Henning Klopper initiated the multitude of praise songs directed at the Afrikaner woman when he claimed her as an 'extraordinary gift to the Afrikaner *volk*' and continued by saying that:

She is unconquerable ... She is undaunted. In her soul the ideal of liberty and of nationhood burns. She has vigour ... She is immortal ... She is the carrier of the Afrikaner concept and the Afrikaner *volk*, and if nobody else arises, she will lead us to the materialisation of the Voortrekker ideal (Klopper quoted in Mostert (ed.) 1940:11, my translation).

One of the most important orations on this theme was, however, delivered by a woman, Judith Pellissier (quoted in Mostert (ed.) 1940:26-29), who spoke at the Voortrekker Monument on 14 December 1938, proclaiming the virtues of Afrikaner women. She said:

At an occasion like this it is proper for us as Afrikaner *volk* to extol the fame and memory of the Mother of our *volk*, the fame and memory of the Voortrekker woman (p.26, my translation)

While the Voortrekker woman was '*...trou aan eggenoot en ideaal*' ('loyal to husband and purpose') (p.27), her holiest calling of all, according to Pellissier, was to be 'Mother of her *volk*, carrier of life' (p.28). As in 1913, the ideal of the *volksmoeder* was invoked to ignite a fire of nationalism, but now it was the image of the courageous and self-sacrificing

Voortrekker women who had left the comfort of the colony, which took precedence over that of the suffering victims of the concentration camps.

In 1949, at the opening of the Voortrekker Monument, all the different readings of the *volksmoeder* ideal came together in the official interpretation of a Van Wouw sculpture of a Voortrekker woman with children, which guards the entrance to the Monument (see fig. 18). In the programme of the opening ceremony, it is proclaimed that this Voortrekker woman symbolised the white, Christian civilisation of South Africa (*Amptelike Program...* 1949:45). Here the Afrikaner woman's role as educator of her children and as guardian of the racial boundaries of her *volk*, was immortalised in a single image.

But it could be argued that it was in 1952 that the ideology of the *volksmoeder* reached its zenith with a special campaign geared specifically towards honouring the mothers of the Afrikaner *volk*. The *volksmoeder* ideal had been so successfully promoted and embedded in the minds of Afrikaner women that, in May 1952, the *Vrou-en Moederbeweging van die ATKV (Suid-Afrikaanse Spoorweë en Hawens)* (hereafter VMB) launched its *Moedersveldtog* (Mothers campaign). Ms M.S.P. Pienaar, the chairperson of the VMB, explained that the aim of this campaign was 'moedershuldiging' ('mother veneration') because

*elke regskape mens [voel] in hom of haar 'n sluimerende hunkering om aan sy of haar moeder hulde en eerbied toe te bring* (MS Pienaar quoted by Kruger supplement 1:1)<sup>45</sup>.

(every righteous person feels a dormant desire in him or her to pay homage to his or her mother.)

Furthermore, the 'Mothers campaign' would provide an excellent opportunity

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<sup>45</sup> The notation 'Kruger supplement' refers to unbound notes and research material which Kruger collected in the process of writing her book *Die Geskiedenis van die Voortrekkermuurtafisserie* (1988). These notes are numbered and divided into what Kruger calls 'bylaes' (supplements) and are located in the Cultural History Museum, Pretoria. The number following this notation refers to the specific supplement and the number after the colon, refers to the page, e.g. (Kruger supplement 3:4) indicates the fourth page of the third supplement.

*om uiting te gee aan die liefde, hulde en dank wat daar vir die opofferende moeders van ons volk in die mensehart omgedra word* (Pienaar quoted by Kruger supplement 1:1).

(to express the love, veneration and appreciation for the devoted mothers of the *volk* which every person feels in his or her heart.)

In this way the *Moedersveldtog* of 1952 continued the tradition of objectification of the Afrikaner woman that had been central to the *volksmoeder* ideal from its inception.

But 1952 also brought into play that other aspect of the *volksmoeder* discourse, namely, of women wanting to be more than silent objects or symbols. In the tradition of the charitable SAVF, the VMB, and other women's organisations whose main objective had always been to serve the *volk*, the Germiston branch of the VMB resolved, on 28 May 1952, to undertake the making of a huge tapestry as a gift to the Afrikaner *volk* to be placed in the Voortrekker Monument. Although only nine women were physically involved in the enormous project of executing the tapestries, women from as far as Rhodesia collected money for this noteworthy cause. Through this project, Afrikaner women were given an opportunity to serve the *volk* in what they assumed to be a typically female manner - the medium of tapestry - as concrete evidence of their love for their *volk* and its history.



## **2. READING THE TAPESTRIES: THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE VOORTREKKER TAPESTRIES**

### **2.1 Figures of the Frontier: Families, Pioneers and *Volksmoeders***

#### **2.1.1 Introducing the family - 'complementary, but not alike'**

The cultural construction of Afrikaner history took shape across a broad front, both in literature and in the visual field. As far as the visual arts are concerned, both the marble frieze inside the Voortrekker Monument and the Voortrekker tapestries attempt to narrate what is arguably the most important event in Afrikaner history - the Great Trek - in visual terms. As I have mentioned before, the Voortrekker tapestries supposedly focus on the role played by women in the Great Trek, whereas the marble frieze in the Hall of Heroes inside the Monument is said to depict the male spheres of military and political life. However, this does not mean that women are excluded from the frieze or men from the tapestries - on the contrary, one's overall and enduring impression of both these works is that of a frontier history told in terms of the actions of both men and women, emphasising their mutually supportive roles.

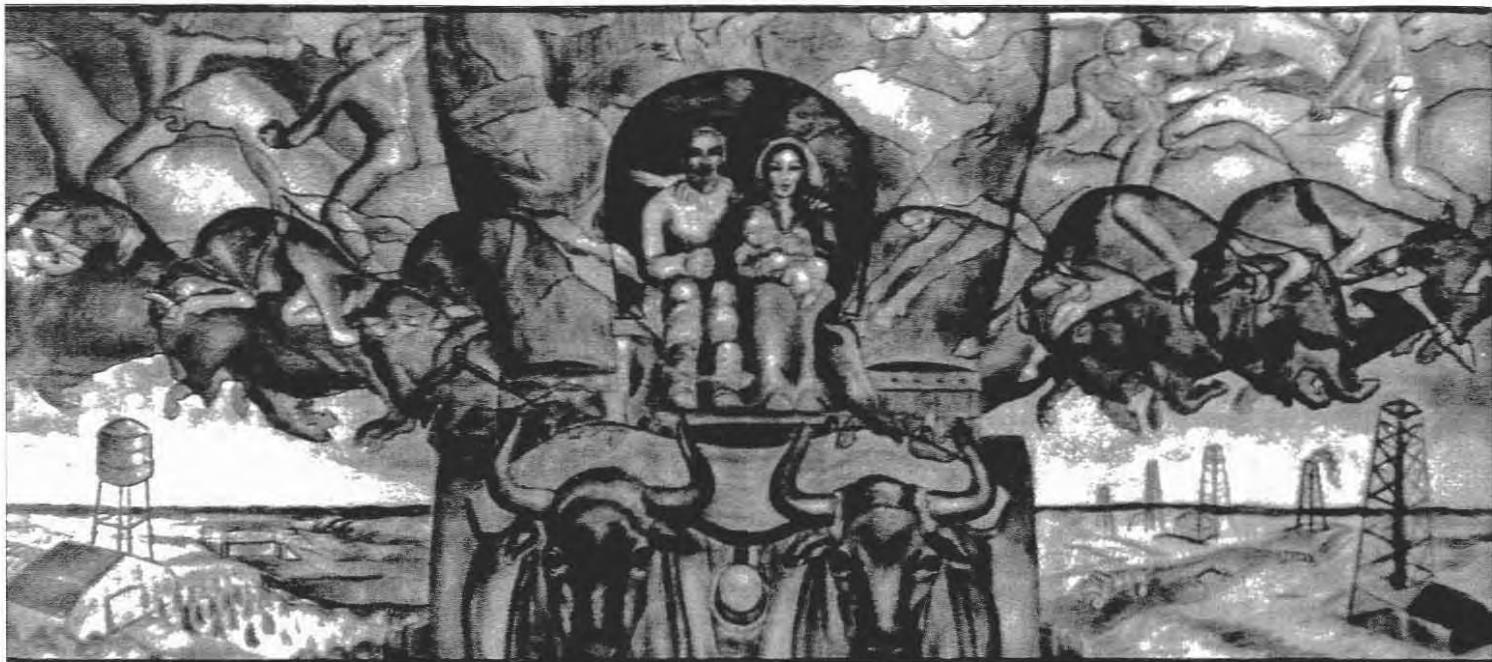
Barbara Melosh identifies a similar feature in the depiction of the American frontier in her book *Engendering Culture* (1991), which focuses on New Deal art and theatre in America in the 1930s<sup>1</sup>. She coins the term 'comradely ideal' to describe 'a recurring configuration [in New Deal art which] showed men and women side by side, working together or fighting for a common goal' (Melosh 1991:4) (fig. 26). Basically, Melosh argues that the comradely

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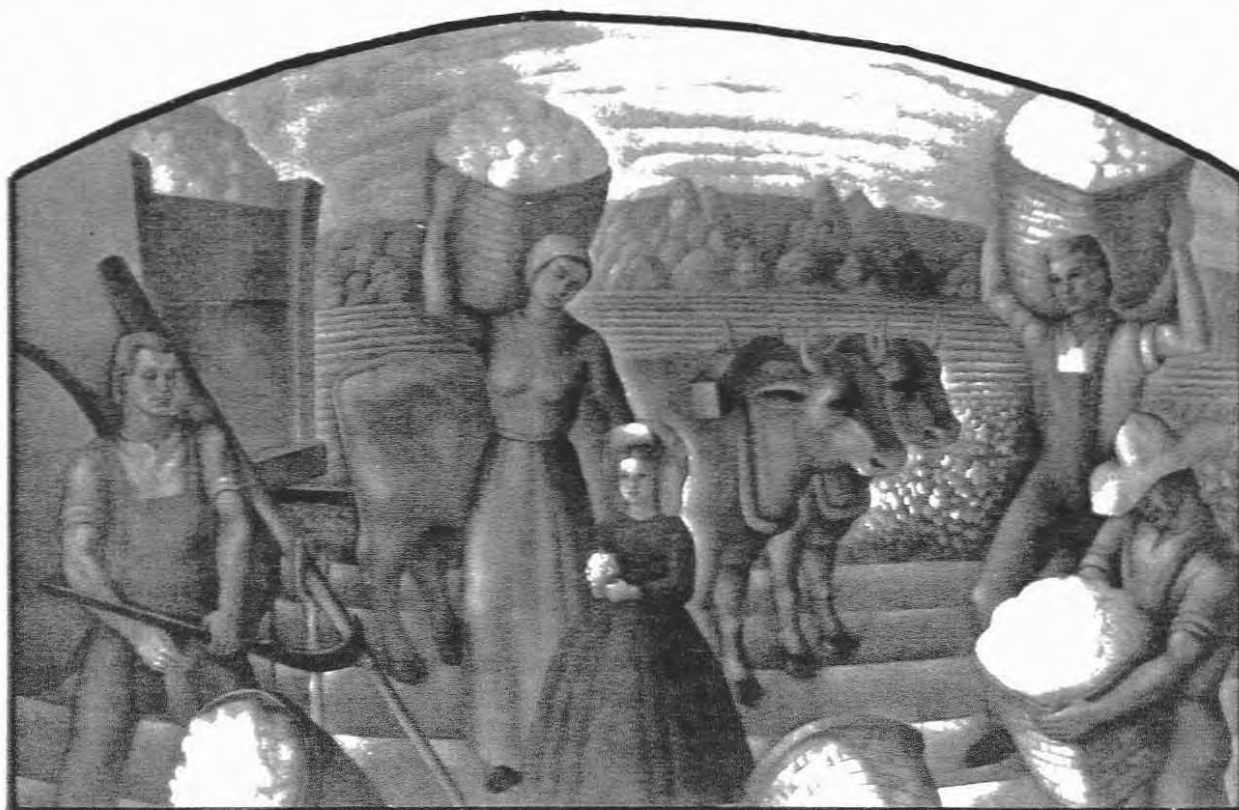
<sup>1</sup> As far as visual art is concerned, Melosh (1991) focuses on the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (later known simply as The Section) which was sponsored by Roosevelt's New Deal and established by executive order in October 1934. Melosh (1991:5) explains that '[o]ften confused with the Federal Art Project (FAP), funded under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Section was not a relief project. Instead, it awarded commissions on the basis of anonymous competitions. By executive order, 1 percent of Public Buildings Administration construction funds were reserved for embellishments'. She continues by pointing out that '[i]n the course of the program, more than 850 artists executed approximately 1 100 murals and 300 sculptures for public buildings....'

Figure 26: 'The Comradely Ideal'

Mural entitled 'The Fertile Land Remembers' by Louise Ronnebeck  
(Taken from Melosh B Engendering Culture, p. 44)



Mural entitled 'Early Settlers Weighing Cotton' by William Sherrod McCall  
(Taken from Melosh B Engendering Culture, p. 48)



ideal represents a compromise simultaneously to satisfy the demands for female liberation in the 1920s and 1930s, and to strengthen ailing manhood 'battered by a discredited war and a demoralising economic depression' (1991:4). Hence, the comradely ideal favours an image of

men and women [who] are allies joined together in the public life of politics and work. At the same time, each image [of the comradely ideal] registers sexual difference: women and men are complementary but not alike (1991:2).

This emphasis on gender difference is regarded by numerous writers to be one of the causes for the oppression of women<sup>2</sup>. Melosh (1991:3) comments on this concern with difference when she reflects on her own experience of the depiction of women in New Deal art:

On the one hand, the sturdy proletarian women of the 1930s...offered images of female strength, alternatives to the slick glamour, male-defined sexuality, or fluffy femininity so pervasive in cultural representations of women. And yet, on the other hand, these images of womanhood, insistently maternal and familial, grated on a sensibility...grounded in a politics of sexual equality.

The parallels between the comradely ideal and the *volksmoeder* ideal are blatantly obvious. For example, Judith Pellissier (quoted in Mostert (ed.) 1940:26-29), who spoke at the Voortrekker Monument on 14 December 1938, described the role of the Voortrekker woman in the Trek of 1838 in terms analogous to Melosh's comradely ideal. Pellissier traced the Voortrekker woman from her sad, but willing parting with the family farm, to the determination which made her work

shoulder to shoulder with her husband...dismantling the ox-wagon, carrying the pieces over the mountain, motivated by a song of conviction, willingness and patience to assist her husband in every way (quoted in Mostert (ed.) 1940:28, my translation).

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<sup>2</sup> In her Feminist Thought. A Comprehensive Introduction, Rosemarie Tong (1989) argues that it is especially the so-called radical feminists who hold that the distinct reproductive roles for women and men lie at the root of women's oppression. Shulamith Firestone believes, for example, that 'when women and men stop playing substantially different roles in the reproductive drama, it will be possible to eliminate all sexual roles' (paraphrased by Tong 1989:74) and Ann Oakley writes that 'the need to mother "owes nothing" to women's "possession of ovaries and wombs" and everything to the way in which women are socially and culturally conditioned to be mothers' (paraphrased by Tong 1989:85).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the *volksmoeder* ideal was one which celebrated female strength while being simultaneously - in McClintock's (1993:72) words - 'a retrospective iconography of gender containment'. And, as I have also explained, this ideal encouraged the belief that women's reproductive capacities determined their political roles in society. The *volksmoeder* ideal was used to naturalise women's maternal role and consequently left most Afrikaner women with a clear view of what a loyal Afrikaner woman's role in society should be. In addition, as in the case of the comradely ideal, which 'simultaneously addressed new views of women and the contemporary crisis of manhood' (Melosh 1991:4), the *volksmoeder* ideal was employed to grant women a limited political role in the rise of Afrikaner nationalism as 'mothers of the nation', while simultaneously - through the emphasis on family values and domesticity - guaranteeing traditional gender hierarchies within the family<sup>3</sup>.

Visually, the affinities between the Voortrekker tapestries and Barbara Melosh's comradely ideal involve more than the mere portrayal of men and women in mutually supportive roles. Melosh (1991:34) indicates that 'images of heterosexual partnership and family life lay at the heart of the usable past constructed by New Deal public art...'. Likewise, in the Voortrekker tapestries, the consistent depiction of the pioneer family - suggested by the presence of adult male and female figures who are invariably in the proximity of children - is an arresting feature.

This emphasis on family life becomes intriguing when one adopts, as interpretative framework, Melosh's suggestion that the depiction of the unified family in New Deal art evoked powerful associative emotions of security and continuity in the face of the many dangers lurking on the frontier (Melosh 1991:44). The political context in which the Voortrekker tapestries were commissioned was characterised by an obsession with dangers

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<sup>3</sup> See section 1.4 on the *volksmoeder* ideal for a reference to Jonathan Hyslop's article which addresses - amongst other issues - the crisis in gender relations in Afrikaner families around the time of the 1938 elections.

such as the 'red menace' (communism) and the 'black peril', both of which were believed to threaten Afrikaner unity<sup>4</sup>. Shrewdly, an image of the unified Voortrekker family was developed to deliver a message which rang truer than ever in the victorious, but foreboding early years of National Party rule: if the family, as microcosm of the Afrikaner *volk* is strong and unified, then the *volk* cannot be shaken<sup>5</sup>. However, it becomes clear that although the Voortrekker family was portrayed as being completely harmonious, this harmony depended on a very clear structuring of family relations. As Anne McClintock (1991:64) observes:

the family offer[s] an indispensable figure for sanctioning social *hierarchy* within a putative *organic unity* of interests. (her italics)

For example, during the centenary celebrations, Dr. Maria Hugo described the family life of the frontier farmers - who later became the first Voortrekkers - as follows<sup>6</sup>:

*Kenmerkend van die gesinslewe van die grensboer was die sterk patriargale familietradisie. Streng Calvinisties-Gereformeerd beskou, was aan die vrou die ondergeskikte plek in die huislike lewe toegeken. Die hoof van die familie was die waardige, streng, maar regverdige pater familias. Sy wil en wet het die deurslag gegee, en naas die liefde wat daar tussen man en vrou bestaan het, was die mate van ontsag wat die eggenote teenoor haar eggenoot geopenbaar het, besonder kenmerkend van die gesinslewe op die voorposte (Hugo 1949:73).*

(A characteristic of family life on the frontiers was the strong patriarchal family tradition. Strictly in terms of Calvinist-Reformed doctrine, the woman was given the inferior position in the home. The head of the family was the esteemed, strict, but fair *pater familias*. His will was law, and apart from the love that existed between husband and wife, the admiration that the wife showed towards her husband, was a special characteristic of family life on the outposts.)

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<sup>4</sup> See section 1.3 for a discussion of the period 1948 to 1952 during which these dangers were best articulated.

<sup>5</sup> The importance of a stable and healthy family life was repeatedly stressed by Afrikaner leaders and writers. In 1945 a lengthy chapter entitled '*Die Huisgesin in die Afrikaanse Kultuurgemeenskap*' ('The Household in the Afrikaans Cultural Community') by G Cronjé was included in a series of three volumes entitled *Kultuurieskiedenis van die Afrikaner* (Cultural History of the Afrikaner) edited by Van Den Heever and Pienaar. Cronjé stressed the important place of the family in the midst of destabilising influences such as urbanisation, new economic policies and racial relations.

<sup>6</sup> It is very interesting to note that the only reference which Hugo gives for her assessment of the role of the Voortrekker woman is Preller's *Voortrekkermense II*, indicating once again that Preller was accepted as the authority on Afrikaner history.

In the tapestries, there is a sustained emphasis on separate gender spheres and this represents an important way in which traditional gender hierarchies within the family is stressed. As with the comradely ideal, Voortrekker men and women are depicted in mutually supportive, but importantly, different roles. For instance, Voortrekker women are insistently associated with children, the sick and the frail while men take up a range of what were considered to be more authoritative roles, from departing on horseback, to conducting the family devotions. In addition, children follow in the footsteps of their parents with daughters in nurturing and domestic capacities, while sons join their fathers in 'manly' responsibilities. Finally, a subtle, but tenacious way in which the separate realms of men and women are reinforced in these panels, involves the continual association of men with travelling and exploring, while women are associated more with settling and domesticity.

Significantly, however, as Paul Carter (1986) suggests in his study of pioneer writing in Australia, during the journey

the relationship between travelling and settling was not causal, but dialectical.... The process of settlement, like the process of travelling, depended on a continuing tension between mobility and stasis: neither made sense except in terms of the other. (Carter 1986:138)

In other words, the supposed separate realms of travelling and settling, dominated respectively by men and women, were closely intertwined and in fact part of the same process, and in this way the interrelatedness of these realms is stressed. This is consistent with Melosh's comradely ideal where - as she describes it, '[w]omen and men are complementary, but not alike' (Melosh 1991:2). It becomes clear that the depiction of unity within the Voortrekker family was reliant on a clear and ordered conception of the separate domains of men and women. This implies that the unity in the family was dependent on a careful articulation of gender hierarchy. In the same way, in the unification of the *volk*, the utilisation of the *volksmoeder* ideal guaranteed female loyalty to the *volk* while asserting the control of Afrikaner (male) leaders.

The frontier family, with its emphasis on separate, but complementary, gender spheres, is summarised by this rhythm of travelling and settling which is dominated respectively by men and women. And what better image to symbolise this dialectical relationship of movement and stasis than the ox-wagon - a home on wheels. Klopper, commenting on the image of the ox-wagon in the work of 18th- and 19th-century pioneer artists, notes that the ox-wagon symbolised both passage:

the ox-wagon is first and foremost a symbol of the artist-traveller's presence in the landscape, marking his passage, transforming the migration trails of animals into roads, and establishing networks of communication that would facilitate the control and administration of the territory

- and 'a source of comfort':

Moreover, as the status afforded these ox-wagons in the history of the Afrikaner's attempt to escape into the interior of Southern Africa suggests, they were a source not only of comfort but also of light in a continent that was perceived as dark and barbaric by almost all nineteenth century travellers. Filled with supplies, the ox-wagon was a miniature home from home.... (Klopper 1989:65)

Except in the first tapestry panel, the ox-wagon as home to the Voortrekker family - albeit a temporary home - is depicted in every panel and acts as a reminder of the supposed unity which exists in the family, in spite of hierarchical divisions and different gender spheres. It is to these separate spheres that I will turn next, focusing first on the travelling and exploring of pioneers, followed by the settling of *volksmoeders*.

### 2.1.2 Travelling pioneers

Coetzer's perception and depiction of the male pioneer in the Voortrekker tapestries best illustrates his debt to Gustav Preller, the famed populist writer and inventor of Afrikaner history. Preller rooted his reconstruction of Afrikaner history in the lives of heroic Voortrekker men. His version of history is one that isolates eminent men and builds a whole history around them. Men like Piet Retief, Gerrit Maritz, Louis Trichardt, Andries Pretorius, Hermanus Potgieter etc. are accorded such heroic status that they become representative of Afrikaner history, to the virtual exclusion of more 'ordinary' people, including women.



Coetzer's designs for the tapestries are mostly based on documents edited or written by Preller, and as a result focus similarly on great names or on events that are associated with well-known men: a scene of a funeral taken from the diary of Louis Trichardt which was edited by Preller (fig. 6), Trichardt's descent of the Drakensberg (fig. 8), Retief's departure before his meeting with Dingane (fig. 10) and the battle of Blood River in which Andries Pretorius played a seminal role (fig. 14). In the text accompanying the tapestries<sup>7</sup>, potential great men are identified, for example, Paul Kruger as eleven year old boy taking part in the battle of Vegkop (fig. 4), and Trichardt's sons Carolus and Pieta (fig. 6).

Preller created and imprinted into the popular imagination vivid images of Voortrekker men who were intrepid pioneers - men who willingly braved the wild and virgin interior. In Preller's eyes, Piet Retief has a special status in Afrikaner history as he was the *first* man to express Afrikaner nationalism by leaving the Cape Colony and the *first* man to comprehend the implications and significance of the Trek for his descendants (Preller 1908:167-169). Preller forges an image of Retief as both an Adamic figure - dehistoricised and witnessing the genesis of the world - and a figure akin to Moses - leading his people into the wilderness in the name of freedom. These constructions of Afrikaner pioneers are further elucidated by FA Van Jaarsveld (1990:13) who writes, in an article focusing on Gustav Preller, that

*[t]eenoor die 'ou wêreld' stel Preller die 'nuwe wêreld'. Dié laat hy nie begin met Van Riebeeck nie, maar met die Groot Trek, wat die 'wildernis' getem het. Soos 'n Washington in Amerika as vryheidsheld verheerlik is, word Piet Retief as vryheidsheld aangebied: hy was die 'ontdekker' van die 'nuwe wêreld' - die binneland, Natal, die Vrystaat en dele van Transvaal - die 'volksplanter' wat 'n 'Bestemmings'-besef gehad het.*

(in contrast to the 'old world' Preller creates the 'new world'. This world of his does not start with Van Riebeeck, but with the Great Trek which tamed the wilderness. As Washington was honoured as a hero of liberty in America, so Piet Retief was presented as liberation hero: he was the discoverer of the 'new world' - the interior,

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<sup>7</sup> A booklet was published outlining the historical background to every tapestry panel. It also contained information on the VMB. Although it was compiled by Nellie Kruger, the many references to compositional devices and symbolism in the tapestries clearly represent the voice of WH Coetzer.

Natal, the Free State and parts of Transvaal - the settler which had a sense of destiny.)

In addition, Preller's pioneers stand in a particular relationship to the land - an aspect that is, as I will indicate, also present in Coetzer's depiction of the Great Trek in the tapestries.

Preller (1908:90) writes of Piet Retief:

*En 'n mens kan sig ook 'n denkbeeld vorm van die gedagtes wat daar deur die Emigrante leier s'n hoofd sal gegaan 't, bij die heerlike aanblik, wat die Oktober-panorama van maagdelike woestheid daar aan sy voete, oplewer. So's 'n reusagtige landkaart lê Natal d  ar voor hom uitgespreid: bosrijke klowe en laagtes, vrugbare vlaktes, trotse berge....*

(One can imagine the kind of thoughts that might have gone through the mind of the emigrant leader, at the thrilling sight yielded by the October panorama of virginal wilderness at his feet. Like a giant map Natal lies spread out: wooded gorges and valleys, fertile plains and glorious mountains....)

If one accepts Annette Kolodny's premise, which she puts forward in her book The Lay of the Land (1975), that the landscape is frequently experienced in gendered terms, it could be argued that in the above quote Preller is inventing the landscape in female terms by describing it as virginal and fertile. Kolodny (1975:4) describes an American fantasy which desires

a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on the experience of the land as essentially feminine - that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification - enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction.

Kolodny's trope, which likens the land to a woman and not simply to a mother, is significant in the context of retrospective Afrikaner accounts of the Great Trek. Preller's pioneers experience the landscape as both maternal, when its fertility is invoked ('*vrugbare vlaktes*') which promises to nurture the Trekkers in their new land, and as a virginal and untouched area, when he speaks excitedly of the 'virginal wilderness' which implies an untraversed terrain. This encounter with the land as woman is significant because, as Kolodny (1975:9) notes, it is indicative of the settler's 'civilising' attitude towards the land:

In a sense, to make the new continent Woman was already to civilize it a bit, casting the stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed.

These sentiments are reproduced in Coetzer's depiction of the Trek in the tapestries, particularly in the panels 'Across the Drakensberg' (fig. 8) and 'Happy Prospect' ('*Blijde Vooruitzicht*') (fig. 9), which both seem to be based on Preller's description of the Trekkers' first sight of Natal, quoted above. In 'Happy Prospect', the land to be conquered - anticipated in the excitement of seeing Natal for the first time - is symbolised by a boy who carries a Voortrekker flag, marching steadfastly down-hill as if guiding the ox-wagon next to him. The text in the booklet accompanying the panels suggests that the flag carried by the boy 'is symbolic of the future republic, Natalia' (Kruger N n.d.(a):13) but, in my reading, this simple image communicates much more. The boy holding a flag is also representative of Preller's pioneers' relationship to the land: with the planting of the flag, what is seen as a wilderness will become a known area. Once planted, the flag will indicate the presence of the conqueror and this implies that the desire for the unknown, virginal area has been satisfied.

This act of bringing the land into submission, which is anticipated in the carrying of the flag, is further reinforced by the high viewpoint of the panel - probably based on the Preller extract of emigrant leaders overlooking the panoramic expanse of the landscape (see above quotation). The Trekkers are quite clearly on top of the Drakensberg and, to the left of the panel, a group of men on horseback are scanning the landscape and slowly starting their descent. While the women are busying themselves in the foreground with the tending of the herd of sheep, the men are surveying 'the promised land' - the 'happy prospect' - as if to capture it first with their eyes before the descent. Mary Louise Pratt (1992:6) detects a similar aspect of passive appropriation in the language used by John Barrow in his book Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798. She writes, quoting from Barrow but with reference to the act of exploring in general, that

[t]he eye 'commands' what falls within its gaze; mountains and valleys 'show themselves', 'present a picture'; the country 'opens up' before the visitors. The European presence is absolutely uncontested.

The pioneer's gaze - Pratt speaks of the 'the seeing man' - marks the first stage in the process of appropriating 'the promised land'. Furthermore, if one takes into account that the male gaze is traditionally directed at the female body, Pratt's image of 'the seeing man' overlooking the landscape seems to be analogous to the questionable union that is anticipated between male pioneer and what is experienced as female territory. As Kolodny (1975:142) puts it:

As soon as the land is experienced as feminine, no masculine activity in relation to it can be both satisfying and non-abusive, and, insofar as we do not wholly control or even understand our responses to that which constitutes the opposite gender, no activity towards it can be wholly 'responsible'.

The panel following 'Happy Prospect' (fig. 9), entitled 'Retief's departure' (fig. 10), depicts the logical next step in this process of appropriation and settling which was started in 'Happy Prospect'. Piet Retief is on his way to negotiate with Dingane about the ownership of the land - Pratt's 'seeing man' becomes an assertive pioneer insistently associated with travelling and actively in pursuit of the land.

Already in the very first panel, 'The Birthday' - which is, according to the booklet accompanying the tapestries, a depiction of 'the good old days prior to the Great Trek [in the colony]' (Kruger N n.d.(a):5) - the distinct role of men in contrast to that of women is affirmed. Whereas the women in this panel are all inside the characteristic and familiar Cape-Dutch wall, the men are mostly outside the wall, one on horseback as if ready to leave, while in the foreground a boy plays with his knuckle-bone oxen and wagon. This association of men with leaving and travelling is sustained throughout the rest of the panels, thereby reinforcing the explorer status of the male pioneer.

That the man as explorer and stalwart pioneer is a standard aspect of frontier mythology, is evident also from Gustav Preller's accounts of the Great Trek. Preller (1940:3) puts much emphasis on Piet Retief as a heroic, strong man who took decisions on behalf of his people. He quotes from Retief's diary:

*ons wanhoop daaraan om die Kolonie te red van die euwels wat dit in alle dele verontrus. Ons sien geen vooruitsig op vrede en geluk nie ... Ons trek om die ware Vryheid hoog te hou. Ons trek om rustiger te kan lewe.*

(we have lost all hope to save the Colony from the monstrosities which cause strife in all parts. We see no likelihood of peace and quiet ... We are emigrating in the name of true Liberty. We are emigrating to live more calmly.)

Another standard feature of all frontier histories, is the Voortrekkers' ambition to find greener pastures, as becomes clear from Kolodny's (1975:7) suggestion that:

Implicit in the call to emigrate, then, was the tantalizing proximity to a happiness that had heretofore been the repressed promise of a better future, a call to act out what was at once psychological and political revolt against a culture based on toil, domination and self-denial.

The better future that the Voortrekkers had hoped to find in the interior brought also despair and hardship, as is indicated in a number of the tapestry panels such as 'Vegkop', 'The Massacre at Bloukrans', 'Blood River' and 'Retief's departure'. But in the broader scheme of Afrikaner nationalism, Gustav Preller and Afrikaner leaders after him, perceptively exploited these adversities of the Voortrekkers so that they became blessings in disguise. The Voortrekkers' sufferings and deprivations were developed into, what I term, a rhetoric of suffering (to be discussed later), aimed at claiming ownership of the land, and used as building blocks for the unification of the *volk*.

According to Preller, the bright future and the freedom of the Voortrekkers lay waiting for them on the other side of the *Grootrivier* (literally Big River), today the Orange River. The Orange River carried great significance as the great divide between British domination and freedom. For instance, in *Voortrekkermense I* Preller (1918:271) writes that

*Pieter Retief en Gerrit Maritz was die voornaamste manne agter die beweging. Drie geselskappe...het hulle uitgestuur, om die land te ondersoek aan die anderkant van Grootrivier*

(Pieter Retief and Gerrit Maritz were the most important men behind this movement [the Great Trek]. They sent out three parties, to explore the land on the far side of the Orange River)

and, with reference to the memoirs of one Johannes Augustus Breedt, who was a little boy when his parents went on trek,

*[s]y eerste herinneringe gaan terug tot aan die oomblik waarop hulle Grootrivier deurgetrek het, wat vir hom 'n baie breë rivier gelyk het, en hulle was baie bang* (Preller 1925:143).

(his first memories go back to that moment when they crossed the Orange River, which looked to him like a very wide river and they were very scared.)

The *Grootrivier*, then, marks the beginning of the journey into virgin territories, by demarcating the moment of trekking from the known into the unknown. Klopper (1989:65) writes in reference to the work of pioneer artists of the 18th- and 19th century that

rivers in general were afforded a symbolic function in the artist-traveller's perception of a world divided into two distinct spheres: one already traversed and charted, the other virgin territory still awaiting discovery and, through that discovery, appropriation into the known.

Klopper's observation that discovery brings with it the appropriation of unknown areas into known territories is significant as it anticipates that rivers also signal arrival and settling, and not just points of departure and leaving.

With reference to the river as a place of departure and of motion though, Coetzer's panel 'Across the Orange River' ('*Oor die Grootrivier*') (fig. 3) should be seen together with his portrayal of 'The Exodus' (fig. 2), since these two panels depict either sides of the Orange River. In 'The Exodus' the Trekkers are still in the familiarity of the Cape Colony. Remnants of culture - a Bible, books, crockery, furniture, a brass candlestick, a flat-iron etc. - are depicted in the foreground where the women are, while the far and distant mountains of the background suggest an ostensibly 'untraversed' nature to which men are departing. In the middle-ground an alignment of ox-wagons is depicted, which forms a visual link between the women in the foreground and 'nature' in the background, in which direction men on horseback are heading.

The next panel in the series, 'Across the Orange River' (fig. 3), depicts the Trekkers having just crossed the river. A wagon on a raft is being pulled out of the river by oxen, while on the far side, more wagons are waiting for the crossing. Whereas the previous panel provides a vista into an as yet unknown future, represented by the mountains in the background, this panel looks back to the familiar, rather than towards what may be waiting for the Voortrekkers. The viewer is given a retrospective scene, and therefore an opportunity to contemplate everything that has been left behind in the Cape Colony. In the foreground of this panel, Coetzer depicts a moment of stasis and displays objects which signify 'civilisation', like the coffee brazier, the bellow and the toolbox. The implication is, of course, that the Trekkers are taking 'civilisation' deeper into the 'wilderness' with every move they make.

Gustav Preller's, and apparently also Coetzer's concern with the crossing of rivers, in particular the Orange River, also extends to the crossing of mountains as important landmarks of the journey. As Carter (1986:52) suggests, for the pioneer, '[m]ountains, like rivers, were cultural objects that made a difference', thereby suggesting that mountains like rivers 'differentiate[d] the uniformity' of the new landscape (Carter 1986:47). Coetzer's tapestry panel 'Across the Drakensberg' (fig. 8) - one of numerous studies by him of this moment - is based on a description by Louis Trichardt in his diary of 25 January 1838, edited by Preller (1917)<sup>8</sup>. The notion of crossing the mountains is associated *par excellence* with the realm of men - the whole panel suggests flux and motion to invoke the domain of the pioneer male figure. Diagonal lines and a plunging perspective intensify the steep slope of the mountain and the risk posed by the descent. The danger of the whole operation is emphasised by the state of the ox-wagon: usually a place of safety, the wagon now seems completely uninhabitable and all the figures are outside preparing for the descent, on foot.

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<sup>8</sup> As Preller repeatedly described it in his Great Trek stories, the descent of the wagons was made possible by placing a branch under the rear axle of the wagon and by tying the oxen's tails to the front of the wagon to prevent them from toppling over. These details of how the wagons were transported down-hill are reproduced precisely by Coetzer in this panel, and Trichardt's description of this process is re-printed in the booklet accompanying the panels.



Characteristically, Coetzer has given symbolic meanings to many of the elements in this work. In the text accompanying the panels he explains that the shadow falling over the tattered wagon anticipates Trichardt's death, and vultures in the sky symbolise the impending loss of treasured animals stung by the Tsetse fly.

But if women, associated with rest and settling, are neglected in this panel which gives an impression of absolute motion, it does not mean that they are absent or excluded from the process of travelling. For, as Carter (1986:54) demonstrates, echoing Klopper's words quoted above, the crossing of rivers - but I would argue also mountains - signifies not only a beginning, it also anticipates arrival and settling:

Rivers, more than any other feature, brought with them the prospect of arriving and ending. They were a kind of travelling that repeated itself: they anticipated the commerce of settled nations.

Within the well-defined bounds of the pioneer family and the comradely ideal, neither men nor women are ever very far away from one another. In the next section, therefore, I will first look at the role of the entire family in the process of settling, before focusing more directly on the roles of Voortrekker women - *volksmoeders* who dreamt of domesticating the wilderness.

### 2.1.3 The settling of volksmoeders

Insisting that the land the Voortrekkers had settled was empty and devoid of any human presence became an important theme throughout Afrikaner history. The Voortrekkers' appropriation of their new land was justified on the grounds that the land did not belong to anyone in the first place. In this way, their descendants, the Afrikaners, could rightfully claim their heritage. Preller (1908:91) describes the Trekker leaders' first impression of the new land in these terms:

*Die land lê leeg en verlate. O'eral sien hul die spore van 'n sware bevolking van vroe'er dage, maar hul weet dat hier, net so's in die streek waar hulle vandaan kom, die verdelgings-oorloge van die Soeloes, krioelende miljoene menselike wesens so's gras weggebrand't. Van die inboorling is daar geen spoor nie.*

(The land lies empty and forsaken. They see signs of a big population of times gone by everywhere, but they know that here, just as in the part where they had come from, the destructive wars of the Zulus had eradicated millions of people like grass which was consumed by fire. The native is nowhere to be found.)

Paul Carter (1986:136) notes that 'to debate the ownership of the land [as Preller does here] is to think of the land in question as a region, a geographical object that can be treated in isolation, as a legal or economic unit'. That Preller is indeed envisaging the new land as an independent region, becomes clear from the following words in which he prepares his readers for the settlement of the Voortrekkers in the new land, a land where the Trekkers will be

*vry van dwang, vry van vervolging, vry van laster en berowing, vry om hulself te regeer na hul eie insigte en behoeftes; en boweal, vry om hul verhouding tot die inboorling bevolking te reël op die enigste met 'n blanke beskawing bestaanbare grondslag: algehele afskeiding* (Preller 1940:5).

(free from pressures, free from persecution, free from slander and thievery, free to govern themselves according to their own insights and needs; and especially, free to arrange their relations with the indigenous people according to the only way which a white civilisation has as principle: total segregation).

Apart from the reference to racial segregation as a prerequisite for successful settling<sup>9</sup>, Preller is also alluding to the importance of order in, and the governing of, the new settlement. Kolodny (1975:7) emphasises the worth of an ordered approach to the settling of the landscape when she writes that

the success of settlement depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else - a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation.

This vision of a land that has been 'mastered' is advanced in the last panel of the tapestries, 'The symbolic résumé' (fig. 15). On the right hand side of this panel, the success of settlement is depicted in contemporary terms: a city is portrayed - invoking Kolodny's

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<sup>9</sup> It is significant that Preller here, in 1940, makes reference to total segregation as the central motivation behind the Trekkers' move. He is, of course, reading the politics of his day into the situation of the Voortrekkers.

'urban nation' - alongside orderly cultivated fields indicating the industry of agriculture. The text accompanying the tapestries reads that 'order and progress, the fruit of the labours undertaken by the Voortrekkers' (Kruger N n.d.(a):20) is represented here. This is contrasted with the chaos and darkness of the unsettled land, represented on the left of the panel, where Voortrekker women can be seen carrying the 'light of civilisation' into this darkness. Significantly, the right-hand side of the panel is dominated by the Greek goddess, Nike, who symbolises victory. In her left hand she is holding a palm branch symbolising peace, in the other hand a laurel wreath as if to crown the Voortrekker heroes (Kruger N n.d.(a):20)<sup>10</sup>.

The emphasis on order, which is apparent in the last panel, is symptomatic of the writing of frontier history because, in this way, the presence of the pioneers are demonstrated and contrasted with the assumed chaos of the unsettled land. Gustav Preller, for example, invokes Johannes Augustus Breedt's account of a very specific way of ordering space in the early settlements:

*Die mense het somar rond en bont gebou, sonder reëlmaat en orde, en toe daar so 'n vyftig van die hartbeeshuisies staan, het dit baie die geaardheid van 'n ronde Kafferkraal gehad. Maar dit het nie lank geduur nie of daar is orde gestel op die bouery. Landdros Abraham Duvenhage het 'n behoorlike dorp uitgemeet...en dáár moes die mense behoorlik in rye bou (Breedt quoted by Preller 1925:145).*

(The people just built everywhere, without method or order, and when there were more or less fifty little wattle-and-daub houses, it looked a lot like a round Kaffir kraal. But it wasn't long before this building of houses was systematised. Landdros Abraham Duvenhage measured out a proper town...and there people had to build in rows.)

The fact that the settlers had to build in rows is significant, firstly because it provided a stark contrast with organic nature, and secondly because, as Carter indicates, the grid town plan implies authority. In this way the presence of the pioneer is uncontested and extremely

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<sup>10</sup> Coetzer used this exact image of the goddess Nike when he was asked, in 1938, to illustrate a statement of solidarity which was presented by the Greek community of South Africa to Dr. EG Jansen, the chairperson of the SVK. In that image Nike is holding her wreath over the faint outlines of the future Voortrekker Monument. The Greek community also gave a cheque for £1 000 as a contribution to the Voortrekker Monument fund.

visible in the settled land. Carter (1986:210) writes that 'one constant feature of the grid plan is its association with the notion of authority or the idea of control'. And importantly,

*the grid plan has not only been imposed from without: it has also been accepted from within.* It has not only been the tool of authority: it has itself been accepted as authoritative. And it has been regarded as authoritative, not because it is supremely rational, but because it is a traditional solution (Carter 1986:210, his italics).

Building in rows - a grid plan - is a common method used to keep chaos and disorder at bay. In the last panel (fig. 15) of the tapestries, a reference is made to the order resulting from the grid plan. Both the cityscape in the background and the cultivated fields and neatly lined orchard in the middle-ground, reveal order and method - the presence of the pioneers.

In addition, the orchard and ploughed fields also suggest agriculture and, as Isabel Hofmeyr suggests, agriculture carries special significance in Voortrekker history. With specific reference to the *Makapansgat* siege<sup>11</sup>, which Preller narrated in a text entitled '*Baanbrekers*', she writes:

in portraying the Boers as agriculturists, the [*Makapansgat*] story naturalizes their right to the land which they earn by honest agricultural labour, unlike the Ndebele [or other native people] who supposedly only hunt and gather wild honey (Hofmeyr 1988:533).

Hence, the contrast between cultivated and uncultivated land is of prime importance in frontier history, as it is indicative of the supposedly honest labour which the emigrants bring with them to the new land. Apart from declaring the controlling presence of the pioneer in combination with the ordered townscape, the representation of agriculture symbolises yet another way of laying claim to the land.

The notion of cultivated land is also represented in the very first panel of the tapestries in the form of the hedged garden (fig. 1), where it is emblematic of civilised life in the colony.

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<sup>11</sup> According to Hofmeyr (1988:531-533), 'Makapan', or in actual fact Mokopane, refers to the leader of a Ndebele community, the Kekana, who with another Ndebele community, the Langa under the leadership of Mankopane, decided in September 1854 to answer the Boers' repeated raids for cattle, women and children with the murdering and mutilation of 28 Boers. When the Boers retaliated, the Ndebele took refuge in a cave 16km from where they lived. Very few of them survived the siege that followed.

Gardens are indicative of permanent residence and, in the tapestries, they are found - as is to be expected - only in the first and last panels which represent a beginning and an end, in contrast to the rest of the panels where the notion of travelling is dominant. In panel 1, 'The Birthday' (fig. 1), the conventional association of women with the domesticated space of the garden is emphasised by the depiction of all the women within the garden wall. In addition and in contrast to all the standing figures, the seated grandmother with cat at her feet seems to epitomise this domesticity. As I will indicate, this association of women with the permanent homestead, represented here, is replaced in the rest of the tapestry panels with what seems to be a longing for a permanent abode. As Kolodny (1984:xiii) remarks in another book focusing specifically on the female experience of the American frontier:

Avoiding for a time male assertions of a rediscovered Eden, women claimed the frontiers as a potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity ... They dreamed...of locating a home and a familial human community within a cultivated garden.

These dreams of 'locating a home' are sensed in some of the tapestry panels when the journey is discontinued, and household objects are displayed. In 'The Outspan at Thaba Nchu' (fig. 5)<sup>12</sup> women are busy with typical domestic chores like washing, kneading dough, patching and sewing, making candles, hanging biltong and cooking soap. These actions become tokens of the civilisation they had left behind and will - hopefully - establish again. Likewise, in 'The Exodus' (fig. 2), women are surrounded by all kinds of household objects, displaying the cultural objects they are taking with them on the road. True to the comradely ideal, however, men are also present in these moments of settling, but in a manner which, more than anywhere else, insists on depicting the gendered division of labour. For example, in 'Family Devotions' (fig. 13), the father reads to his family and servants from the Bible, a moment of stasis dominated by the presence of the patriarch, and an action which carries major social significance and asserts the status of the man as the head of the Voortrekker household. This is repeated in the panel depicting a funeral in the veld (fig. 6)

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<sup>12</sup> Thaba Nchu was a popular gathering place of the Voortrekkers where they usually stayed for quite a few months in order to prepare for the journey ahead.

where Louis Trichardt, one of the leaders of the Trek, is depicted holding the Bible in his hands. It is this insistence on separate gender spheres - which might be complementary but never alike - which reveals the presence of *volksmoeder* ideology in Coetzer's depiction of the Trek in 1952.

The pervasive influence of the *volksmoeder* ideal is especially evident in Coetzer's portrayal of the battle of Vegkop (fig. 4)<sup>13</sup>. In this panel women are shown fighting next to their husbands, casting bullets and loading guns - even though Gustav Preller, in his research on this incident, has asserted repeatedly that all the Voortrekker women and children were protected inside a laager of wagons during the battle of Vegkop. In *Voortrekkermense III*, for instance, Preller relates:

*In die laer het [genl. Andries Hendrik] Potgieter hom klaargemaak op 'n strijd van lewe en dood. Hij het self die laer om en om geloop om te sien dat iedere man op sij plek was, en gesorg dat vir die vroue en klein kinders in die middel 'n viertal waens aanmekaar getrek, en van bo met velle en planke oordek werd, teen die gegooide assegaaie. Aan die vroue het Potgieter daar gesê: 'al sien julle jul mans ook val, ik wil g'n enkele geluid van julle hoor nie!' (Preller 1922:4).*

(In the laager [general Andries Hendrik] Potgieter had prepared himself for a clash for life or death. He walked around the laager to see that every man was on his place and, for the women and small children, he had placed in the middle of the laager, four wagons with hides and planks overhead against the thrown assegais. To the women Potgieter said: 'Even if you see your husbands fall, I do not want to hear a single sound from you!')

This version was also confirmed by one Anna S. Coetzee Botha in her description of Vegkop, recounted in Preller's *Voortrekkermense IV* (1925:31). Knowingly or unknowingly, WH Coetzer has deviated from his mentor, Gustav Preller, to depict Voortrekker women in line with contemporary characterisations of the *volksmoeder* ideal which, ever since the centenary celebrations, had invoked courageous Voortrekker women rather than the passive

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<sup>13</sup> This panel depicts the Voortrekkers in a battle with 'blood-thirsty savages' in the Free State in October 1836 (Kruger N n.d.(a):8).

and patient women of the concentration camps as role models for Afrikaner women<sup>14</sup>. Quite clearly, by 1952 WH Coetzer was still perpetuating the idea of stalwart pioneer women who would travel barefoot over the Drakensberg and likewise, would fight next to their husbands if need be<sup>15</sup>.

In conclusion, then, the tapestries portrayed Voortrekker women within the simultaneously flexible and closely defined parameters of the *volksmoeder* ideal. On the one hand, Voortrekker women's sustained association with the domestic sphere and with qualities of nurturing invoked the mothering aspect of the *volksmoeder*, while images of stalwart pioneer women gave strength to the *volksmoeder* ideal. However, in both these cases, women were subjected to the ultimate control of men.

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to remember that Coetzer had access to an earlier visual version of the battle of Vegkop. As discussed earlier (in section 1.3.2), the depiction of this event is also included in the historic marble frieze inside the Voortrekker Monument. In this way, the sentiments and impact of the centenary celebrations which were carried forward to 1949 with the opening of the Voortrekker Monument, were still present as late as 1952 in Coetzer's designs for the tapestries.

<sup>15</sup> An image of courageous Voortrekker women is also present in the depiction of 'The Massacre at Bloukrans' (fig. 11) which refers to the night of 17 February 1838 when, according to the text accompanying the tapestries 'Dingaan's [sic] hordes swooped down on the families left behind by Retief' (Kruger N.d.(a):15). Only women, children and elderly men were reportedly present.



## 2.2 Linearity, Expansionism, Progress

In his construction of Afrikaner history, Gustav Preller seems to have an ambiguous conception of the *volk* and its history. In a few cases, he conceives of the *volk* as a given, existing somehow outside of time. For example, he writes that

[d]it is die onbewuste wil van die massa, die eindelose aantal persoonlike wilsuitinge, of, as mens wil die intuïsie van die nasie, wat die geskiedenis maak (Preller 1940:3).

(it is the unconscious will of the masses, the myriad personal convictions, or, if you want, the intuition of the nation that creates history.)

But, more overtly, Preller constructs a linear version of time where historical events unfold one after the other, invariably dominated by the presence of an heroic historical figure. This version of history, which he recounts in a staccato rhythm, consists of great events through which, it would seem, the *volk* is constituted:<sup>16</sup>

is daar aangripende dinge in ons geskiedenis - of in die van die wêreld - als die gebeurtenisse van Blauwkrans, Bloedrivier en...die historiese Toegela omgewing ná 6 Februarie 1836? (Preller 1908:152).

(is there anything more moving in our history - or in the world's history - than the events of Blauwkrans, Blood River and...the historical Tugela district after 6 February 1836?)

Following Preller, Coetzer too expresses a somewhat ambiguous conception of time in the Voortrekker tapestries. As I will indicate, there are certain panels that speak about timelessness, but ultimately, the Voortrekker tapestries posit a linear conception of time and space, firstly in the ordering of historical events, and secondly in the way the tapestries are displayed. As far as the latter is concerned, the fifteen panels were especially designed to

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<sup>16</sup> This linear approach to history was repeated when, in 1949, a calendar was published (probably by the SVK) to be sold at the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument. The calendar honoured an important name or event every month: the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument (December 1949), the young Voortrekker hero Dirkie Uys (January 1950), Piet Retief (February 1950), Bloukrans (March 1950), Louis Trichardt with his trek (April 1950), across the Orange River (May 1950), the Voortrekker church in Pietermaritzburg (June 1950), the relationship between the Trekker and God (July 1950), Andries Hendrik Potgieter (Augustus 1950), Vegkop (October 1950), Andries Pretorius (November 1950) and Blood River (December 1950). (The month of September is missing from the calendar).

be hung in a long row on a slightly curved wall, thereby inviting the viewer to 'read' the panels from left to right. The Trek was therefore presented as a series of events with each panel leading logically to the next one. This linearity is reinforced by the way in which the history of the Trek is told. Even a cursory glance at the tapestries will confirm the widely-held belief that the Great Trek was a unified event with a distinct origin and conclusion. The first and last panel represent respectively the point of departure in the Cape Colony, and the end, which - as I have already indicated - is a symbolic rendering of a city and cultivated fields in the interior.

How time and space are experienced, has recently been the focus of theoretical discussions in various fields<sup>17</sup>. David Bohm (1965:175 quoted in Fabian 1983:171), for example, writes that

[t]he notion that there is one unique universal order and measure of time is only a habit of thought built up in the limited domain of Newtonian mechanics.<sup>18</sup>

For Paul Carter (1986) - commenting on the way in which historians have documented Australia's past - this linear conception of time typifies the historian's approach. He notes that '[a]s history's secretary, [the historian] colludes in history's own wish to see chaos yield to order' (Carter 1986:xiv). This determination to order the past is, according to Carter, facilitated by reducing historical space to a stage, or a theatre where history unfolds itself. He writes that:

This kind of history which reduces space to a stage, that pays attention to events unfolding in time alone, might be called imperial history

and concludes:

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Hawking's popular book A Brief History of Time is one example of the obsession with time in our era.

<sup>18</sup> Omar Calabrese (1992:130) describes an alternative to such a linear conception of time with reference to the post-modern sensibility of, for example, the television viewer: 'An extremely wide range of choices encourages the [television] viewer to experiment with what is called 'zapping'...[viewers] change obsessively from one channel to the next, reconstructing their own palimpsest from a variety of fragments of the images being broadcast. In this way they probably obtain a kind of consumption that no longer follows a linear interpretation of texts. The text obtained is completely different, functioning according to the occasional, rapid and probably random meeting of images, rather than content.'

Hence, imperial history's *defensive* appeal to the logic of cause and effect: by its nature, such a logic demonstrates the emergence of order from chaos (Carter 1986:xvi, his italics).

Gustav Preller used exactly this strategy in his reconstruction of the Voortrekkers' trek into the interior. By ordering the lives and diaries of the emigrants into a chain of cause and effect, the image of a unified and organised trek - a Great Trek - was created and affirmed in the popular consciousness of the descendants of the Trekkers. Coetzer's depiction of the Trek in terms of linearity reveals an unquestioning internalisation of this popular version of the journey into the 'promised land'. For example, in the tapestries, Coetzer has chosen to depict various events that follow one another in time, but that are not necessarily events that occurred in the lives of the same group of emigrants. Among these are: the massacre at Vegkop (fig. 4), the only event taken from the trek of Andries Hendrik Potgieter; and Retief's departure (fig. 10) and the massacre at Bloukrans (fig. 11), which are from a totally different trek, namely that of Piet Retief. Due to the strict chronology in time, however, the viewer is not aware of the fact that s/he is in fact viewing a depiction of different treks with different destinations. Throughout the tapestries, therefore, the supposed homogeneity of the Great Trek is constantly reinforced.

In addition, to strengthen the notion of chronology, the panels depicting major historical events are dated in the text accompanying the tapestries. Thus, for example, 'Vegkop' is dated 16 October 1836 (fig. 4), 'A funeral in the veld', taken from the diary of Louis Trichardt, is dated 11 March 1837 (fig. 6), 'The massacre at Bloukrans' is dated 17 February 1838 (fig. 11), and 'Blood River' is dated 16 December 1838 (fig. 14). The battle of Blood River is the last historical event to be depicted in the tapestries, as though this event constitutes the climax of, and, in a sense, is therefore the conclusion to the Voortrekkers' history.

However, these panels in strict chronological order are interspersed with other panels which are supposed to impart an understanding of the day to day life of the Voortrekkers and their culture and customs. Panels such as 'The outspan at Thaba Nchu' (fig. 5), 'Repairing wagon wheels' (fig. 7), 'Family devotions' (fig. 13) are not dated, but are used - to invoke Carter's trope of the theatre - as background decor to the more important events being played out on the stage of history. In this way culture, which is an embodiment of the identity of the Voortrekkers, is placed outside history and as a result it is naturalised and becomes timeless. The conception of national culture and identity as primordial - a popular way in which the nation 'imagined' itself in the 1930s, as I indicated earlier<sup>19</sup> - is reinforced as late as 1952 with the use of these panels.

Following the example of historians before him such as Gustav Preller, Coetzer acts as a mediator of past events. Paul Carter (1986:xiii-xiv) alludes to this inevitable process of mediation, when he speculates on Captain Cook's first survey of the place Cook would later name Botany Bay:

Before the name: what was the place like before it was named? How did Cook see it? ... What we see is what the firstcomers did not see: a place, not a historical space. A place, a historical fact....

The places that are portrayed in the Voortrekker tapestries might have been spaces before, but through the eyes of Coetzer - which are really the eyes of Afrikaner historians from whom Coetzer gleaned his version of the Trek - these spaces become historical places in Afrikaner history. The tapestry panels become a way of measuring history, for, by invoking all the places of historical importance, the movement of the Voortrekkers can be traced as they travelled from the Cape Colony towards their anticipated goal of prosperity and liberty.

In The West as America. Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920 (1991), William H Truettner speaks of a similar experience in the artistic documentation of the westward expansion in America:

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<sup>19</sup> See section 1.2.2 for a discussion of ways in which the narrative of the nation is told.

The predictability of the sequence is revealing. One is led from great moment to great moment, literally across the continent, in a march demonstrating the progress of America as a free and independent people and as a nation accumulating innumerable resources (Truettner 1991:68).

The movement in time and space that this quote refers to, is evidently linear and therefore anticipates expansion. Likewise, in the tapestries, each panel represents a historical place set deeper into the interior. These historical places make up the frontier - what Paul Carter (1986:158) describes as a line between what is known and unknown, between culture and nature. He writes:

Essentially, the frontier is usually conceived of as a line, a line continually pushed forward (or back) by heroic frontiersmen, the pioneers. Inside the line is culture; beyond it, nature. As the frontier moves, nature is bulldozed into submission ... Culture does not evolve or adapt: it simply replicates itself over an ever-growing territory.

However, while expansionism is measured in terms of culture's 'ever-growing territory', it completely excludes what is beyond the frontier. As Carter (1986:158) puts it:

The frontier signifies the decisive exclusion of all that is not culturally familiar: and it excludes it even when it incorporates it. For the act of incorporation involves the complete silencing and obliteration of whatever it was that made the frontier necessary in the first place. The rhetorical significance of the frontier is that it empties the beyond of any cultural significance even before it is subdued.

Whereas linearity presupposes expansion, it does not necessarily imply progress. But, if one goes back to William Truettner's statement quoted above, it is quite clear that he links the idea of linearity ('the sequence') and, by implication, of expansionism, with the notion of progress. As Elizabeth Broun (1991:viii) explains in her foreword to Truettner's The West as America:

progress provided a natural analogue to the seemingly endless march of restless settlers who moved from a less-than-perfect present toward a Promised Land of abundance.

It becomes clear, then, that the notion of progress - in all its various guises - was an important theme through which expansionism could be justified in frontier art and literature. Broun (1991:viii) continues:

The artists who portrayed westward expansion [between 1820 and 1920 in America] would have us believe that homesteaders went west not only for 160 acres to farm but for the larger purposes of taming the wilderness, Christianizing the savages, or spreading the gospel of democracy and freedom.<sup>20</sup>

Taming the wilderness and Christianising the 'savages' are, of course, exactly the kind of themes that were introduced in retrospective accounts of Afrikaner frontier history as proof of progress, and to justify the claims to land that had been made by the Voortrekkers in the interior of South Africa in the 1830s. In the tapestries - as one example of such retrospective accounts of the Great Trek - these notions of progress abound. A first, quite predictable way in which progress is demonstrated is in terms of Western conceptions of material and economic wealth. For example, in the last symbolic panel (fig. 15), modern structures like high-rise buildings and houses have replaced the ox-wagons of the other panels. In addition, cultivated fields are to be seen instead of the uncultivated nature in the other panels. The prosperity which the Voortrekkers left behind in the Cape Colony, symbolised by the homestead and garden in panel 1, is regained in the last panel, symbolised by permanent structures which invoke concomitant associations of progress and permanent settling.

In the foreground of the city depicted in the last panel, the spire of a church is recognisable, apparently representing 'the first little church which the Voortrekkers built in Lydenburg' (Kruger N n.d.(a):20). The prominence of the church and, by implication, the presence of Christianity, suggests the idea of spiritual wealth - a second way in which progress is demonstrated in the tapestries. William Truettner (1991:71) refers to a similar conception when he concludes, with reference to a remark made by the American artist John Gadsby

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<sup>20</sup> Broun (1991:ix) writes further: 'The theme of progress was so pervasive that it affected most intellectual movements of the last century. As Stephen Jay Gould has explained in *Wonderful Life: the Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (1989), scientists misrepresented all evolution as steady, linear progress - one leading inevitably toward Man as its highest expression - when in fact early life teemed with alternative possibilities.... The "branching tree" of evolution so beloved of early biologists, with its misleading visual presentation of linear progress, is just one of many "incarnations of concepts masquerading as neutral descriptions of nature," he writes.'

Chapman about his painting The Baptism of Pocahontas at Jamestown, Virginia, 1613 (1840), that

Christianity was the ordained religion of progress and that as the nation expanded and prospered only those who shared the faith would benefit (Chapman paraphrased by Truettner 1991:71).

The Christian faith was presumed to have the power to 'civilise' the 'savages' and as such provided convincing justification for a policy of expansionism.

In the reconstruction of Afrikaner frontier history, Calvinism, the variant of Christianity adhered to by most Afrikaners, provided an even better defence for expansionism. In terms of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination it was believed that the Dutch/Afrikaner emigrants of the 1830s were God's Chosen people entrusted with the special task of christianising the 'heathen' in the interior of South Africa. This was supposedly demonstrated to them at Blood River, where they entered into a collective covenant with God.

However, historian André du Toit (1983, 1984) has found no evidence of the existence of such a belief in 19th-century documents and in what was put forward by later historians as 'evidence' for such a belief<sup>21</sup>. Du Toit (1983:921) writes that:

Despite its pervasive presence in the literature, the content of the Calvinist paradigm of Afrikaner history has seldom been fully and explicitly articulated ... Its provenance is simply assumed - and little documented.

And, in a subsequent article dealing with the same issue:

A critical survey of the supposedly abundant evidence from primary sources regarding the Trekkers' and Trekboers' ideas on their calling and mission martialled by [F.A.] Van Jaarsveld soon reveals a remarkable position: very little, if any, hard evidence can be found worthy of serious consideration (Du Toit 1984:61).

In his 1983 article entitled 'No Chosen People: The Myth of the Calvinist Origins of Afrikaner Nationalism and Racial Ideology', which focuses on the secondary literature in

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<sup>21</sup> Du Toit (1983:922) also lists other scholars such as Martin Legassick, Irving Hexham, Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee who have 'expressed some doubts regarding the historical and sociological premises of the Calvinist paradigm of Afrikaner history'.



which references to this myth is found, Du Toit traces its origins to the writings of David Livingstone in the 1850s. Du Toit (1983:939) writes:

It was Livingstone who in his Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa (1858) initiated the shift from the degeneracy<sup>22</sup> to the Calvinist paradigm in the literature on early Afrikaner politics and history ... In so doing, he almost singlehandedly reshaped everyone's perceptions of early Afrikaner history.

How the early Afrikaner emigrants actually viewed themselves, is not the central issue in this section. What is of importance in Du Toit's analysis is how, but also why, the conception of the early Dutch/Afrikaner emigrants as Calvinists was promoted in the writings of both Afrikaner and liberal historians alike. Du Toit (1983, 1984) has argued that the reason this myth was promoted, was to rationalise and to justify apartheid's ideology and the concomitant concept of racial inequality - the focus of my next section. As far as the question of how this myth was conveyed is concerned, Du Toit (1983:928) writes that:

The social agencies that ensured the retention and transmission to succeeding generations of the original Calvinist core of beliefs and values, if perhaps in a somewhat reduced and impoverished form, were the Dutch Reformed Church and the patriarchal family unit. The customary practice of Bible readings, particularly of the Old Testament, and saying prayers at home held the central place in the religious and cultural life of Trekboer society.

In a subsequent article, which focuses on primary documentation, Du Toit (1984) demonstrates that, while the influence of the Old Testament on the Trekkers is beyond dispute, this is not enough evidence to suggest that they indeed saw themselves as God's elect. In fact, as Du Toit (1984:59) maintains:

It is indeed a matter of considerable difficulty to ascertain just what the patterns of political thinking and religious belief were that formed under these peculiar [i.e. insulated frontier] conditions.

Throughout the Voortrekker tapestries, reference is made to the supposed religiosity of the Voortrekkers. In 'The Exodus' (fig. 2) the big family Bible and hymn books are centrally

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<sup>22</sup> The 'degeneracy paradigm' is a term which Du Toit (1983:931) uses to characterise the way in which 'travellers and enlightened officials described the views and practices of frontier Afrikaners' until the middle of the 19th century.

displayed, indicating that the Trekkers are pious and therefore can appeal to God for His blessing. Likewise, in 'A funeral in the veld' (fig. 6), Trichardt is holding a Bible while the coffin of the daughter of one of the Trekkers is being lowered. But the central role ascribed to religion in the Voortrekker household is best portrayed by the fact that an entire tapestry panel is dedicated to this theme. In '*Boekevat*' or 'Family devotions' (fig. 13) the Voortrekker family is seated around the table with the 'patriarch' sitting at the head and reading from the Bible - a practice which is indicative of his authority and, in addition, conforms to the Calvinist tradition of celebrating patriarchal control.

Although 'Family devotions' does not depict a specific historic occasion, but strives rather to convey a sense of the regularity with which family prayers were conducted in the Voortrekker family life, there exists in the retrospective accounts of the life of the Voortrekkers ample examples of specific places where family prayers were held. Gustav Preller, for example, describes how the Trekker leaders, upon viewing Natal, would pray for God's blessings in the new land (1908:91), and he also makes much of the religious rituals before and after Blood River (1908:156). This purported religious stance of the Voortrekkers was held up as an example for their descendants, and as I have indicated, the commemoration of the Covenant - the Day of the Vow - has always been an important religious ceremony for the Afikaners.

To summarise, in the tapestries, WH Coetzer has constructed a version of the Great Trek which is primarily linear. This linearity presupposes expansion, which in turn is linked to progress. The Voortrekkers' progress in the interior of South Africa was retrospectively measured in terms of economic, and more importantly, spiritual wealth. The supposition that the Voortrekkers were God's Chosen People was reiterated in most retrospective accounts of Voortrekker history - also in the Voortrekker tapestries.

In the next section, in which I will focus on the depiction of race in the tapestries, I will attempt to show how the politics and beliefs of the day - like the myth of the Calvinist origins of Afrikaner nationalism - influenced Coetzer's conception of this aspect of frontier history.

### 2.3 Savagery and Civilisation

Throughout twentieth-century Afrikaner accounts of their frontier history, the 'benefits' of Western civilisation - introduced into the 'dark' interior of South Africa by the Voortrekkers - were celebrated and acclaimed. One case in point - as I discussed earlier - is the opening ceremony of the Voortrekker Monument - a monument built with the sole aim of commemorating the Voortrekkers' great 'civilising' deed of establishing a white race in the interior of Southern Africa. By 1952, the presumed benefits of 300 years of white presence in South Africa were again celebrated, but this time the celebrations extended to incorporate white English-speaking South Africans as well, in an act which was clearly meant to marginalise the experiences and histories of the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa.

As suggested in the previous section, the benefits of civilisation, which were extolled by these celebrations, were indicated and measured in terms of both material and spiritual progress - the only sanctioned spiritual progress being the conversion from paganism to Christianity. This section will focus on what was probably the most pervasive tactic through which the blessings of civilisation were communicated in retrospective accounts of Afrikaner frontier history - both in the tapestries and in literary accounts - namely, the contrasting of images signifying savagery with images denoting civilisation. Most often these images of savagery and civilisation are found in scenes of warfare, and constitute what I term a 'rhetoric of suffering', which was formulated to demonstrate the Voortrekkers' - and by implication their descendants' - entitlement to the land they settled.

Within this rhetoric of suffering indigenous black people are always depicted as brutal and savage primitives, and are repeatedly portrayed as aggressors, while the Trekkers are seen as innocent victims of their violence. This tendency to insist on the Voortrekkers' innocence

is identified by Isabel Hofmeyr (1988) in her study of Gustav Preller, specifically with reference to Preller's narration of the *Makapansgat* siege<sup>23</sup>. Hofmeyr (1988:533) writes that

[v]iewed against even a small range of extant and subsequent historical data, Preller's piece [about the *Makapansgat* siege] clearly involves an extraordinary degree of inversion, displacement and repression. It was of course the Boers who consistently transgressed codes of hospitality in the Transvaal as so many of the alternative versions of the story symbolically suggest.

To emphasise the savagery of the natives and, by comparison, the civilized manners of the Boers, Preller constructed - in Hofmeyr's terms - texts that 'appealed to a popular memory of violence and bloodshed' (1988:534). She continues:

much of [Preller's] work generally met with wide acclaim precisely because it popularised violence. Virtually all Preller's texts read as an inventory of atrocities which eventually calcify into a set of almost legendary codes: the battered baby skulls, the dead women, the drifting feathers, the skinning alive and so on. All these shorthand images in turn acquire the status of implicit historical explanation and justification.

Preller's popularisation of violence was effective as a strategy aimed at convincing early Afrikaners of their right to the land, paid for by their predecessors in blood and sweat. In addition, this rhetoric of violence and suffering succeeded in establishing the 'savagery' of indigenous Africans in contrast to the 'innocence' and kindness of the Voortrekkers, thereby persuading descendants of the Voortrekkers that they had a God-given responsibility to educate and civilise the 'natives'.

Interestingly, however, although an attractive strategy, this depiction of the native as savage and barbaric is not necessarily typical of all retrospective frontier histories. As Truettner has shown in his study of the retrospective documentation of expansion in America, scenes of battles with the indigenous Indian people were played down or completely omitted from the earliest accounts of the frontier history of the USA for various reasons. Truettner (1991:155) writes that '[s]cenes of Indian life from the 1830s through the 1850s ... suggest that the

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<sup>23</sup> See fn.11 in this chapter for a description of the so-called *Makapansgat* siege.

intellectual concept of the Noble Savage still influenced painters of the American West'.

According to Truettner (1991:151), these painters drew

(particularly in the 1830s and 1840s) on an idealized Indian representing the 'natural' man conceived by whites as an alternative role model - the independent male who lived beyond the bounds of civilisation but who embodied wilderness 'virtues'.

From the 1840s, however, this idea of the Noble Savage was challenged by depictions of the 'dark side' of the Indian in conflict with white civilisation - a portrayal which has, according to Truettner, persisted to the present (1991:151, 159-178).

Truettner's claim that the 'dark side of the Indian' has been the focus of retrospective images of frontier history to the present day, is qualified by Barbara Melosh in her assessment of New Deal art and theatre. Melosh (1991:34-42) shows that scenes of violence were once again suppressed in the 1930s in Section Art<sup>24</sup> as Section administrators 'expressed distaste for scenes of Indian-white warfare' (1991:41). By 1937, these objections were cast as a matter of policy and 'Indian warfare [was vetoed] as part of a general antiwar ideology' (1991:41)<sup>25</sup>.

By contrast, images of black-white conflict were hardly ever censored in accounts of Afrikaner frontier history. One exception was in 1916, when, as Isabel Hofmeyr reports, the Department of Native Affairs initially opposed the filming of Gustav Preller's script *De Voortrekkers* 'on the grounds of the undesirability of any activities calculated to bring black and white in this country into even mimic armed conflict' (Hofmeyr 1988:521 quoting Department of Native Affairs to Preller, 8 July 1916), but this must surely be one of few

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<sup>24</sup> See fn.1 of this chapter for a brief description of 'Section art'.

<sup>25</sup> It is interesting to note that local demand for scenes of traditional frontier violence did in a few cases lead to the inclusion of more violent imagery in Section art (Melosh 1991:41-43). Melosh does not suggest any reasons for this demand for scenes of Indian-white warfare, but I would argue that the general public probably believed that these kinds of scenes were a more accurate rendering of their own understanding of a present, built on a past fraught with suffering and struggle. For example, Melosh cites an example in which a disappointed historian from Greensboro, Georgia, petitioned repeatedly for a mural depicting a historical massacre scene associated with the town of Greensboro. The mural was eventually granted.

such cases. Most other accounts of Afrikaner frontier history popularise black-white conflict. For example, the major historical event in Afrikaner religious and cultural life, the Day of the Vow, is intended precisely to remind the *volk* that their right to the land was 'earned' through black-white conflict. Given the policies of racial segregation, which I discussed in my first chapter, black people were seen as a serious threat to Afrikaner unity, purity and dominance. As a result, in retrospective frontier history these people were consistently portrayed as savage, brutal and uncivilised - and the reasons for the absence of the depiction of indigenous people as Noble Savages or romanticised natural people are therefore not hard to find.

WH Coetzer openly displays his allegiance to the racial views of the Afrikaner *volk* in the Voortrekker tapestries. In at least three tapestry panels, namely 'Vegkop' (fig. 4), 'The massacre at Bloukrans' (fig. 11), and 'Blood River' (fig. 14), white-black conflict is foregrounded with the Voortrekkers depicted as the victims of assault. Each time the Trekkers are on the defense inside their laager of wagons, while the black opponents are obviously on the attack. In addition, nudity is quite clearly used to indicate savagery while clothing suggests civilisation.

As far as clothing as a signifier of civilisation is concerned, it is significant that the widest variety of Voortrekker dress is to be found in the first panel, 'The Birthday', which, as I have suggested earlier, is associated with civilisation in a number of ways. In an article about the tapestries, WH Coetzer (1974:89-90) writes with reference to this panel:

When the exodus was in full swing and the Voortrekkers penetrated deeper and deeper into the wild interior, where they had to climb up and down mountains, fords rivers and streams, and cut their way through dense bush and undergrowth, their clothing naturally suffered severely and it must be remembered there were no shops at which to buy new clothing: thus, to show how beautiful and picturesque the costumes were before the actual Great Trek took place, I could think of no better theme than a Birthday Party, where everyone wore his or her 'kistklere' (Sunday best). This panel is, then, more or less a 'fashion plate' of the period.



Coetzer's depictions of what was taken to be authentic Voortrekker garb, are based most probably on the lengthy descriptions of Voortrekker dress by one Lourens Christiaan De Klerk. De Klerk took part in the Great Trek, and his memoirs are recorded in Preller's *Voortrekkermense I* (1918:244-245). However, despite the fact that De Klerk recounted that women not only wore traditional dresses but, like their menfolk<sup>26</sup>, often donned leather clothes during the week, in the tapestries women are forever in their traditional Voortrekker dresses and almost always neat and orderly. In the few cases where Voortrekker women did not appear to be completely neat and clean, Coetzer was criticised and, as a result, probably changed his depiction of these scenes, except in the case of 'A funeral in the veld', discussed below. Clearly, what was expected of Coetzer, was to portray Voortrekker women according to the ideal of the *volksmoeder*, which idealised them as role models for Afrikaner women.

In 'Vegkop' (fig. 4), there are signs of the strain of the battle in the clothes of the men, like the central figure's tattered sleeve. But, here as elsewhere in the tapestries, women appear to be in their Sunday best. A notable exception to this, however, is 'A funeral in the veld' (fig. 6). With reference to this panel Coetzer writes (1974:93) that the viewer should 'note the worn and patched clothing after [the Trekkers had been] wandering for so long in the wilds'. For instance, the blue dress of the little girl in the centre is worn out at the elbows, and the pink dress is patched on the right elbow. In addition, dirt is clearly evident on the Trekkers' clothes. Not surprisingly, Coetzer was criticised for this panel by Trudie Kestell, who was Coetzer's advisor and a self-proclaimed authority on the matter of 'authentic'

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<sup>26</sup> De Klerk writes '*In vroueklere was die variasie miskien nog groter. In die week het baie vroueklere gedra wat heeltemal van leer gemaak was, net soos die manne ook*' (De Klerk quoted in Preller 1918:244-245). ('The variation was probably greater in female clothes. During the week, many wore female clothes which was made up entirely of leather, like the men'). The comparison with men's clothes is somewhat unclear, but I would suggest that the similarity lies in the fabric, rather than in the style of clothes. In other words, women wore dresses made from leather and not pants, as De Klerk's words might imply.

Voortrekker dress<sup>27</sup>. As Nellie Kruger (1988:21) reports, Kestell apparently complained about the depiction of Voortrekker women as being ‘so verwaarloos’ (‘so neglected’) and explains that ‘*Mej. Kruger wou die nagedagtenis van die Voortrekkervrou nooit enige oneer aandoen nie*’ (‘Miss Kestell never wanted to dishonour the memory of the Voortrekker woman in any way’). It is, however, not clear at which stage these objections were made and whether they influenced Coetzer’s final depiction of this scene.

Another apparent instance in which Kestell’s advice was not heeded, is with reference to the panel depicting ‘The Massacre at Bloukrans’ (fig. 11). Kestell remarked in correspondence with Nellie Kruger that Voortrekker women would never have worn their hair loose at night - they would always plait it before going to bed (supplement 33). Likewise, in *Voortrekkermense I*, De Klerk reported that hair was never worn loose, not even by young girls (De Klerk quoted in Preller 1918:244-245). In the Bloukrans panel, while it is clear that attention has been paid to depicting women with either one or two plaits down their backs as both De Klerk and Kestell had described it, the prominent female figure holding the rifle in the foreground, and possibly some others, have loose hair. Coetzer has probably favoured this depiction to emphasise that the women were totally unprepared for the surprise attack by ‘Dingaan’s[sic] hordes’ (Kruger N n.d.(a):15).

In ‘The massacre at Bloukrans’ (fig. 11), the women, clad in white night clothes, are contrasted vividly with the dark, nude bodies of their attackers, suggesting that Coetzer is drawing on the common association of dark with bad and white with good. This can also be seen in the panel depicting the battle of Blood River (fig. 14), where black figures fall all

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<sup>27</sup> In supplement no. 33 to her book on the history of the Voortrekker tapestries, Nellie Kruger credits Trudie Kestell with the attempts to institute what was presumed to be Voortrekker dress as *Afrikaner volksdrag*. As early as 1915 Kestell and her mother arrived in Voortrekker dress at a Day of the Vow celebration at Maselspoort. By 1929, Kestell was distributing patterns for these dresses and in 1938, Voortrekker dress was widely accepted as the national costume of Afrikaner women. Exactly by which method ‘authentic’ Voortrekker dress was determined is not clear, but it seems fair to assume that this dress was based on the descriptions in Preller’s *Voortrekkermense I* (1918) which seem to have been accepted as the most influential account on the subject.

over the surface of the panel, their arms in the air indicating their complete defeat. The lanterns which the Voortrekkers purportedly hung around the outer sides of the wagons serve to emphasise their association with light. By extension, these lanterns become a symbol of the 'civilising light' which the Voortrekkers carried into the dark interior of Africa - a theme also depicted in the very last panel.

While in the Blood River panel black figures are killed for attempting to infiltrate the laager, in some other panels they seem to be quite safely inside the laager - but then as servants and therefore on the Voortrekkers' terms: in 'The Birthday' (fig. 1) and in 'The Exodus' (fig. 2), servants are recognised by their distinctive triangular-shaped hats. JA Wiid, who was apparently consulted on the matter of the inclusion and depiction of slaves in the tapestries<sup>28</sup>, reported that despite the fact that slavery was outlawed shortly before the start of the Great Trek, many ex-slaves went with their 'masters'. According to Wiid, these were mostly Hottentot rather than black slaves, and they wore *seroete*, the triangular hats depicted by Coetzer in the tapestries. These non-white servants might be included in the laager of the Voortrekkers, but their place is very well defined. For example, in 'Family Devotions' (fig. 13), black servants are not included in the central circle of the family but are pushed to the margins of this scene, standing in the background or squatting to the right of the table. Their westernised attire indicates the progress that has been made in the holy mission of 'civilising' the 'natives' and is in stark contrast to the naked black men in a panel such as 'Blood River' (fig. 14). But the fact that they are not seated at the table signifies that they have not completed their journey towards civilisation, and indicates the Voortrekkers' missionary role in matters of their faith, and indeed, of their lives. However, this journey towards civilisation can of course never be completed, since there is no final redemption -

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<sup>28</sup> This information is taken from supplement no. 33 to Nellie Kruger's book (1988). A copy of JA Wiid's letter to Mr Cloete, who was apparently the secretary of the ATKV, is included. In this letter Wiid talks about the inclusion of non-white figures in the tapestries. Why Wiid corresponded with Cloete and not with Coetzer, is not clear.

the Voortrekkers are metaphorical forever 'one step ahead' of the subjects to whom they are bringing the gospel and the benefits of civilisation.

In the year of 1952, the year marking the start of the tapestry project, the Voortrekkers' descendants still perceived themselves as 'one step ahead' of the indigenous people of South Africa. As Du Toit (1983, 1984) has argued, the notion of the early Voortrekkers being God's elect and exercising their ordained right over the land, although fallacious, provided a rationalisation for apartheid. Significantly, the central tenet of Calvinism, namely predestination, was manipulated to justify racial inequality and in this way Calvinism and indeed Christianity, was linked to apartheid in an unfortunate, but for the followers of this doctrine, convincing way.

### 3. BETWEEN ART AND CRAFT: MARGINALISING THE VOORTREKKER TAPESTRIES

In March 1979 an Afrikaans article was published in the bilingual magazine Golden Fleece/ Goue Vag about the Voortrekker tapestries. The last paragraph of this article, entitled 'Volkskat praat in taal sonder woorde' ('Volk treasure speaks a language without words'), reads:

*Die Voortrekkermonument-muurvries [i.e. die tapisserieë] het die rol van die vrou op meer as een manier beklemtoon en vereer: haar rol as pioniersvrou soos uitgebeeld in die panele; die meesleurende krag van haar geloof in 'n saak, sodat vroue duisende ponde kon insamel om ander vroue in staat te stel om iets groots te maak; en die effektiwiteit en sensitiwiteit van 'n taal wat eie is aan 'n vrou - die taal sonder woorde, deur die medium van naald en wol (Golden Fleece 1979:27).*

(The Voortrekker Monument frieze [i.e. the tapestries] illuminated and honoured the role of the woman in more than one way: her role as frontierwoman as portrayed in the panels; the compelling force of her faith in a project which moved women to collect thousands of pounds in order to enable other women to make something remarkable; and the effectivity and sensitivity of a language which is true to a woman - the language without words, in the medium of needle and wool.)

Most of the issues raised in this quotation have been dealt with thus far in this dissertation: in my first chapter I looked at the ideal of the *volksmoeder* and its emphasis on *volksdiens* as the most important incentive which motivated Afrikaner women to collect money for, and to execute, the mammoth task of making the Voortrekker tapestries. I then proceeded in my second chapter to examine the depiction of Voortrekker women and men on the frontier in Coetzer's designs for the tapestries. This leaves me with a final area that should be explored and which is anticipated in the last part of the above quotation, namely the issue of the status of needlework and its perceived relation with women.

Describing needlework in these terms is, of course, nothing new. When Dr. WA Nicol, the chairperson of the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument, suggested that the tapestries should focus on the role of women in the Great Trek, he was forging a link based on the popular assumption that needlework is somehow essentially 'women's work'. But

more significantly, at the meeting of the *Vrou-en Moederbeweging*(VMB) in Germiston in May 1952, where Nellie Kruger proposed the idea of a gift from the Afrikaner women to the Voortrekker Monument, she naturally chose needlework as medium because her express intention was to give something representative of Afrikaner women to the Voortrekker Monument. Kruger said that the idea of a tapestry grew from a desire to present a gift to the *volk*, which would not only be expressive of '*[die Afrikaner vrou se] liefde vir [haar] volk en sy geskiedenis*' ('[the Afrikaner woman's] love for [her] nation and its history'), but, more importantly, something which would be executed in a '*treffende vrouemanier*' ('strikingly feminine manner') (Kruger supplement 3)<sup>1</sup>.

This vague notion of a 'strikingly feminine manner' seems to sum up how needlework has always been conceptualised. Kruger describes a typical needlework class when she writes

*[h]ulle [die vrouens] het so stil gesit en borduur dat jy maar net die naalde deur die styfgespande doek oor die groot rame kon hoor in- en uitglip. Kom daar 'n besoeker...kyk die leerling vriendelik op en groet, maar dadelik is die aandag weer by hul werk. Hulle is nie haastig nie, glad nie, maar volledig oorgegee en toegewy aan 'n taak wat hulle bekoor.* (Kruger supplement 47d:3)

(the women sat so quietly embroidering that one could hear the needles as they slipped in and out through the tightly stretched canvases on the huge frames. If a visitor arrived...the pupils would look up and give a friendly greeting, but immediately their attention would be back with their work. They are not in any hurry, not at all, but completely engrossed and devoted to a task they find satisfying)

In her book *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), Rozsika Parker describes the embroidering woman with 'eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched - the position (which) signifies repression and subjugation' (Parker 1984:10), an image that is also reflected in the above quotation. Kruger uses the passive form in Afrikaans '*oorgegee aan*' ('devoted to') and describes the women as 'quiet', thereby emphasising traditional associations of femininity with passivity. In addition, the women are 'engrossed' in their task as if completely satisfied, and in this way the perceived intimate alliance between needlework and femininity is reinforced.

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to footnote 45 of section 1.4, for an explanation of my use of these supplements.

Clearly, then, the decision to present a gift of needlework to the Voortrekker Monument, represents an attempt by Afrikaner women to gain access into a space which had, up to then, largely excluded them. Their tapestry gift would, in effect, represent them symbolically in the masculine space of the Voortrekker Monument<sup>2</sup>. But coupled with these women's attempts to negotiate access to the public sphere is the recognition that needlework - generally seen as a minor craft - needs to be elevated to the status of art in order for the tapestries to be regarded with due respect and gravity. Nellie Kruger therefore tried to change the perception of tapestry from 'craft' to that of 'art'<sup>3</sup>.

However, while Kruger challenges the art-craft dichotomy, she seems reluctant to question the supposed existence of an intimate alliance between needlework and femininity which - as Rozsika Parker demonstrates in her book *The Subversive Stitch* (1984) - gave rise to the dismissal of needlework as 'craft' in the first place. It is worth quoting Parker (1984:4-5) at length:

When women paint, their work is categorised as homogeneously feminine - but it is acknowledged to be art. When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And, crucially, it is categorised as craft ... [T]here is an important connection between the hierarchy of the arts and the sexual categories male/female. The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft. This division emerged in the Renaissance at the time when embroidery was increasingly becoming the province of women amateurs, working from the home without pay. Still later the split between art and craft was reflected in the changes in art education from craft-based workshops to academies at precisely the time - the eighteenth century - when an ideology of femininity as natural to women was evolving.

It is thus clear that in order to re-negotiate the status of needlework as craft, the perception of needlework as a signifier of sexual difference must first be challenged. Not surprisingly, Kruger's attempts to redefine the status of needlework, and particularly of tapestry, are

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<sup>2</sup> Klopper (1993:31) points to a similar aspect with reference to Xhosa culture when she writes that 'while Xhosa-speaking women produce beadwork in the private domain, men generally wear these beads in public...women effectively inhabit and therefore share the public spaces in which men wear their beadwork'.

<sup>3</sup> I use quotation marks for terms like 'art' and 'craft' to indicate my continuous questioning of these concepts and to avoid reinforcing existing hierarchies of 'high' and 'low' art, which are conjured up by using such terminology.



therefore repeatedly frustrated by her own internal, but also by external conceptions of what women's work entails. At this point the presence of the *volksmoeder* ideal is once again strongly felt in prescribing the role, place and status of women in Afrikaner society. And for this reason, the distinction between 'art' and 'craft', while questioned and debated by Nellie Kruger in the process of making the tapestries, could never be completely overcome due to the pervading ideology of the *volksmoeder* ideal.

### 3.1 Art v. Craft

Nellie Kruger uses various methods to challenge the perception of needlework as an inferior 'craft' and to change its status to that of 'art'. Firstly, it would seem that she and others believe that the artistry of the tapestries could be linked to the labour-intensiveness of the project. The fact that the Voortrekker tapestries took more or less seven years to complete becomes standard information whenever they are discussed after their completion. The intense labour of the women is used to legitimise their participation in the public sphere, the sphere where art reigns.

A second strategy Kruger uses to change the perception of tapestry from 'craft' to that of 'art' in order for it to be 'worthy' of entering the public sphere, is carefully to outline the antiquity of the tradition of needlework. At the Germiston meeting in 1952 where she first proposed the project, Kruger names the famous Bayeux tapestry<sup>4</sup> as a starting point for this tradition. According to her, this work should be enough justification for Afrikaner women to believe that their tapestries too can be immortalised as a document of Afrikaner history, captured through their skill and devotion. Kruger goes so far as to say: 'It feels to me as if the Afrikaner women can create a piece of art greater than the famous Bayeux tapestry. We just have to start' (Kruger supplement 3:5; my translation). She then proceeds to link this international tradition with what she calls the local tradition of needlework by Afrikaner women, which originated, according to her, in the clothing that the Voortrekker women had to make for their entire households. The fact that Kruger chooses to locate the beginning of the local tradition of needlework with these 'functional' pieces made by Voortrekker women, is telling. It seems as if she is trying to forge a link between needlework and Afrikaner history - another attempt on Kruger's part to raise the esteem that needlework might hold.

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<sup>4</sup> Although this is called a tapestry, it is in fact an embroidered work. This piece of Anglo-Saxon needlework depicts the Norman Conquest of c.1088 and the events that lead up to it.

This attempt to establish a link with Afrikaner history is also demonstrated by two other pieces which Kruger chooses to discuss. In December 1947 and in January 1948, Kruger - then the editor of the women's section of *Die Ruiter* - published two articles in this weekly journal<sup>5</sup>. The first article focused on an embroidery ('*muurkleed*') which was executed in 1915 by a branch of the *Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie* (SAVF) in Pretoria in an effort to collect money for the Rebels of the 1914 Rebellion<sup>6</sup>. Linen squares of four inches each were sold at 2 cents a piece to the women of the SAVF. They had to embroider the name of either a hero ('*volksheld*') or an historical incident on the square, whereafter these were stitched together to form a wall-hanging (figs. 27 & 28). The names of important *volkshelde* (heroes) were chosen by various women - (general) 'De La Rey' appears 11 times, 'Jopie Fourie' 8 times and 'Piet Joubert' 6 times<sup>7</sup> - showing their respect for the heroic history of their *volk*.

A similar piece of needlework that Kruger focuses on in a subsequent article (January 1948), was made by a Mrs Martha Wapenaar in 1919. She embroidered the names of celebrated Voortrekkers, and of nationalist members of the parliament and the provincial councils of 1919, on a bedspread, thereby expressing her support for the project of Afrikaner nationalism. (figs. 29-31) In her article, Kruger stresses that while Wapenaar's embroidered work is perhaps not an artwork, it should nevertheless be held in high esteem because it was the sincere expression of an Afrikaner woman's love for her *volk* (Kruger 1948:29). Kruger

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<sup>5</sup> See my introduction for a reference to Kruger's involvement in *Die Ruiter*.

<sup>6</sup> Britain's declaration of war against Germany in 1914 left the Union of South Africa with not much choice but to fight against the Germans in, what was then, South West Africa. Republican Afrikaners did not want to fight on the side of Britain, which had defeated them barely 14 years earlier, and certainly not in South West Africa, which they perceived to be their ally. Under General De La Rey a rebellion was planned and although he was subsequently shot in a freak accident, a brief uprising did take place in October 1914 but was promptly suppressed. Money was needed for the captured men who were fined in court.

<sup>7</sup> Piet Joubert was one of the men who had sworn at Paardekraal in December 1880 that he would fight for the independence of Transvaal, after Lord Carnarvon annexed it. This led to the *Eerste Vryheidsoorlog* (First war of Liberation) between the Boers and the British, which in 1881 brought independence to the Boers. De La Rey was a much admired Boer general, and Jopie Fourie was executed during the Rebellion of 1914 for treason.

**Figure 27; 28:**

### Historic embroidered work, 1915 (& detail)

Made by the women of the SAVF

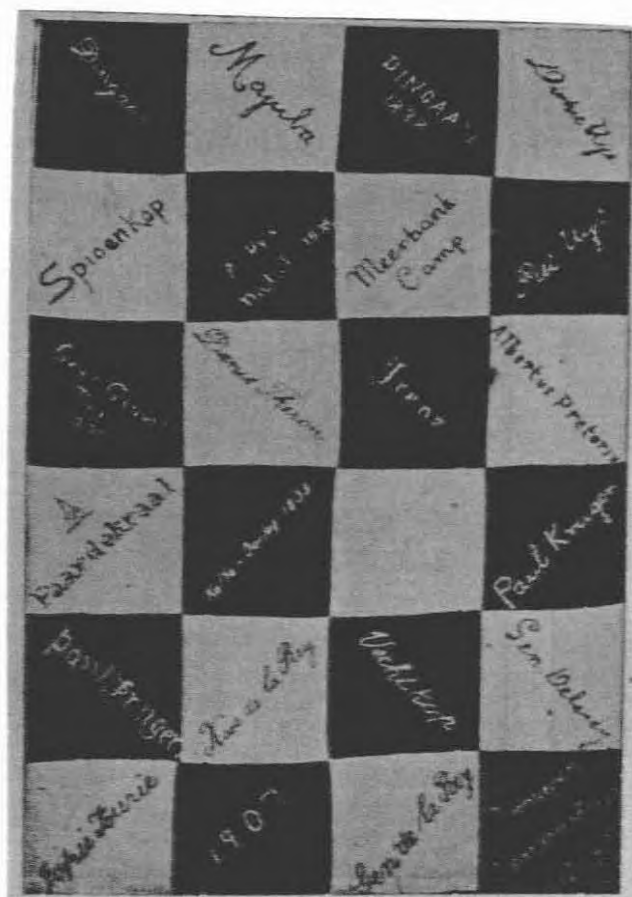
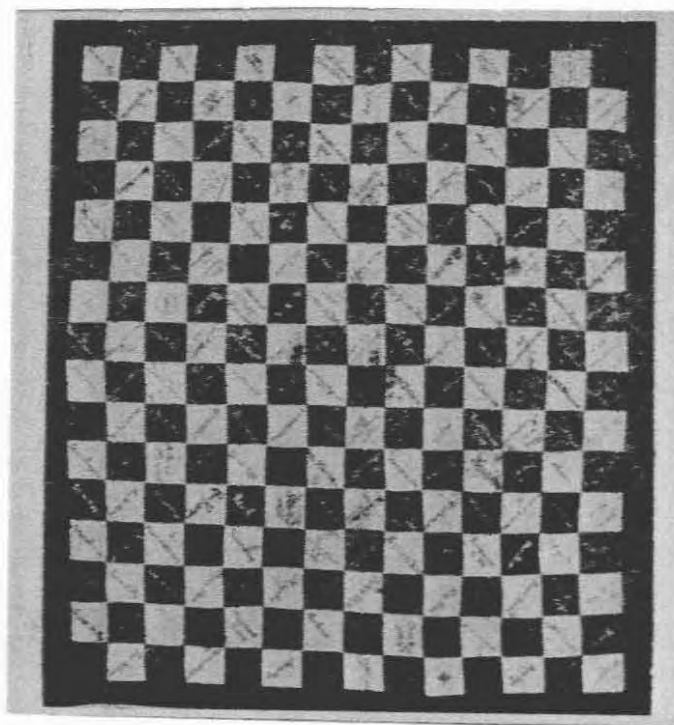
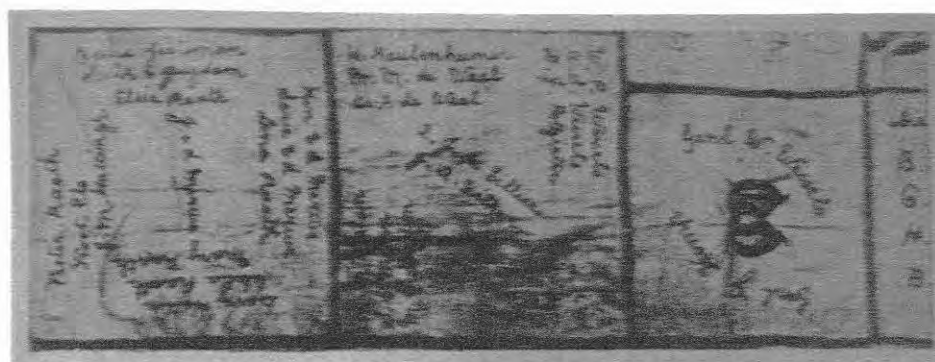
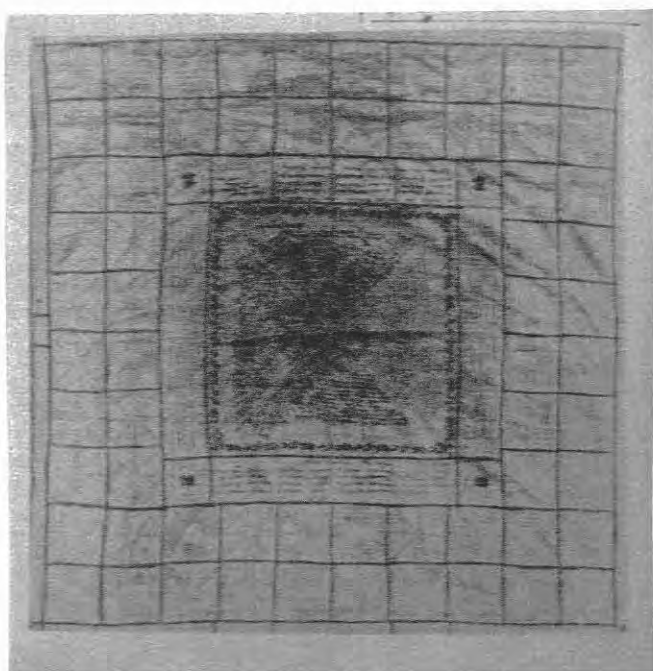


Figure 29, 30, 31: Historic embroidered work, 1919 (& detail)

Made by Ms Wapenaar



further points out that Martha Wapenaar was a descendant of the famous Voortrekkers, Erasmus and Susanna Smit - almost as if the embroidered work will be further consecrated through the important genealogy of its maker. Consequently, Wapenaar's bedspread becomes a symbolic link with the Voortrekkers' history, and the intended Voortrekker tapestries will continue this link<sup>8</sup>.

In isolating these two examples it becomes clear that Kruger does not seem to differentiate between techniques of embroidery and tapestry because, as she explains it, 'currently embroidery is often simply called tapestry when the whole surface is covered in stitches of the same length' (Kruger supplement not numbered; my translation)<sup>9</sup>. By using the terms 'tapestry' and 'embroidery' interchangeably, Kruger is suggesting that these different forms are part of a broader category of 'women's work'.

Although Kruger does not claim the 1915 and 1919 pieces to be outstanding works of art, they are important early samples of a tradition which culminates in the intended Voortrekker tapestries. It is interesting that Kruger, in her attempts to establish this tradition, does not focus on needlework pieces depicting domestic imagery, but on works which commemorate Afrikaner history. She writes, after the completion of the Voortrekker tapestry project:

*Die twee kleedjies [1915, 1919] was vir my genoeg bewys van die behoefte aan spontane verering wat ook die Afrikaanse vroue in hul harte dra. Ons beskik oor die liefde en die bekwaamheid om 'n groot kultuurskat aan ons volk te gee... 'n stuk*

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<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, the tendency to use needlework to inculcate nationalist sentiments, as in the case of the 1915 and 1917 embroideries, occurred again some five years later when the Afrikaans women's magazine *Die Boerevrou* published 'eg Afrikaanse handwerk patrone' ('genuine Afrikaans handiwork patterns'). In December 1920 and again in April 1921 patterns designed by the artist Erich Mayer were published for embroidery and although he depicted indigenous flowers and animals, they were called 'eg Afrikaanse patrone' ('genuine Afrikaans patterns').

<sup>9</sup> Kruger continuous that '[b]orduurwerk is in die tegniese sin die kuns om enige stuk geweefde materiaal met die naald te versier. Tapisseerwerk is in wese 'n geweefde stuk waarvan die patroon in die kettingdrade dig opgebou word met die inslagdrade' ('embroidery is in a technical sense the art to decorate any piece of woven fabric with a needle. Tapestry is really a woven piece of which the pattern of the warp is built up with the weft').

further points out that Martha Wapenaar was a descendant of the famous Voortrekkers, Erasmus and Susanna Smit - almost as if the embroidered work will be further consecrated through the important genealogy of its maker. Consequently, Wapenaar's bedspread becomes a symbolic link with the Voortrekkers' history, and the intended Voortrekker tapestries will continue this link<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Incidentally, the tendency to use needlework to inculcate nationalist sentiments, as in the case of the 1915 and 1917 embroideries, occurred again some five years later when the Afrikaans women's magazine *Die Boerevrou* published 'eg Afrikaanse handwerk patrone' ('genuine Afrikaans handiwork patterns'). In December 1920 and again in April 1921 patterns designed by the artist Erich Mayer were published for embroidery and although he depicted indigenous flowers and animals, they were called 'eg Afrikaanse patrone' ('genuine Afrikaans patterns').

<sup>9</sup> Kruger continuous that '[b]orduurwerk is in die tegniese sin die kuns om enige stuk geweeftde materiaal met die naald te versier. Tapisserwerk is in wese 'n geweeftde stuk waarvan die patroon in die kettingdrade dig opgebou word met die inslagdrade' ('embroidery is in a technical sense the art to decorate any piece of woven fabric with a needle. Tapestry is really a woven piece of which the pattern of the warp is built up with the weft').



*borduurwerk só treffend, só nasionaal en só 'n hoogtepunt in die naaldwerkkuns dat dit onsterflik sal wees.* (Kruger 1988:2)

(These two little cloths [1915, 1919] were enough proof to me of the Afrikaner women's need to venerate sincerely. We possess the love and the ability to present a great cultural treasure to our *volk*...a piece of embroidery so striking, so national and such a climax in the art of needlework that it will be immortal.)

Kruger uses the diminutive form *kleedjies* when she refers to the 1915 and 1919 pieces, as if to stress the idea that they represented the humble beginnings of a tradition which reached a climax in the making of the famous Voortrekker tapestries. The Voortrekker tapestries are far superior both in terms of scale and in the fact that images, and not only words, form the basis of these tapestries. The implication is that the Voortrekker tapestries express veneration and nationalism as it was never done before.

In addition to tracing a tradition of needlework by referring to earlier works, Kruger also isolates earlier teachers who shared their knowledge and passion for the subject and thereby contributed to this tradition. Kruger refers to Emily Hobhouse, who first saw the '*kunssin*' ('artistry') (Kruger supplement 3:1) and talent of Afrikaner women and consequently wanted to teach them weaving, spinning and lace-making. After her came Juanita Grant (née Horak) who was - in contrast to Hobhouse, in Kruger's words (supplement 47d) - 'one of Afrikaner descent, an offspring of Marie Koopmans-De Wet' (my translation). Once again, the notable descent of this woman and her links with an historically prominent and influential Afrikaner family provides a way to validate the tradition of needlework. Grant said of the Afrikaner woman that 'she possesses a talent that will astound the world should she get the opportunity to develop it' (Grant paraphrased by Kruger in supplement 3:2; my translation). Grant referred, of course, to the talent of needlework, and she became the pioneer of artistic-needlework (*kunsnaaldwerk*) in South Africa<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Juanita Grant was one of the first women who studied teaching at the *Normaalkollege* in Bloemfontein where she also received training in artistic-needlework, embroidery and lace-making. In 1912 she became the artistic-needlework instructor at the *Normaalkollege* where she had between seventy and eighty students. She said about her students that

In addition to the role played by earlier teachers, it could be argued that the 1915 and 1919 embroideries themselves form part of the tradition of education of Afrikaner women in the skills of needlework. In this they are very similar to the historic samplers of medieval times onwards which, as Parker and Pollock (1981:66) write,

reveal a female childhood structured around the acquisition of prescribed feminine characteristics: patience, submissiveness, service, obedience, modesty.

Like samplers, the 1915 and 1919 embroideries are expressive of femininity and are part of an ongoing tradition aimed at teaching women the skills of needlework.

Having established an indigenous tradition of needlework, Kruger uses a third strategy to change the perception of needlework as craft, by making a direct appeal to the public to accept this tradition as art. In an article intended for the journal *Die Wolboer*, entitled '*Wol as kunsmedium. 'n Pleidooi vir die naaldd tapisserie*' ('Wool as artistic medium. An appeal for the tapestry'), Kruger pleads for the recognition of needlework as an artform:

*Ons moet die prestige van wol in sy mees verhewe vorm, naamlik as kunsmedium, tot sy reg laat kom.*(Kruger supplement, not numbered)<sup>11</sup>

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*de meisjes, die hier willen leren, brengen later hul verfijnde smaak en ideeën(sic) mee naar huis en omgevingen - op die wijze word langzamerhand bij ons volk de zin voor schoonheid ontwikkeld. Dit is wel het voornaamste wat met dit onderwijs beoogd en bereikt wordt!* (supplement 47d:2)

(the girls that study here take their refined tastes and ideas with them to their home environment - in this way a feeling for beauty is slowly cultivated in our volk. That is indeed the most important [aim] of education!).

In 1921 Grant agreed to teach needlework at *Meisieskool Oranje* and, in 1924, she opened a school for artistic-needlework in Zastronstreet, Bloemfontein. At this school, women could obtain a two year diploma in artistic-needlework and all its branches like wool and silk embroidery, applique, gros point etc., which was recognised by the Department of Education.

Kruger admires Grant especially for her 'africanisation' of embroidery designs and writes that many of Grants' designs had '*Afrikaanse*' flowers and animals as central motif. She is remembered not only for her teaching of needlework skills to Afrikaner women, but also for the localisation and the nationalisation of a needlework tradition. She was consulted on the project of the Voortrekker tapestries and selected to execute one of the tapestries, but died before she could start (Kruger supplement 47d).

<sup>11</sup> In the supplements, this piece has a parenthesized note indicating that it was written for publication in *Die Wolboer*. However, I could not locate the article and assume therefore that it was never published.

(We should allow the prestige of wool in its most elevated form, namely as artistic medium, to come to its own right).

However, while Kruger argues in divers ways for the recognition of needlework as art, her attempts are frustrated by various prejudices. As Parker(1984:16) notes:

The extraordinary intractability of embroidery, its resistance to re-definition, is the result of its role in the creation of femininity during the past five hundred years.

This close connection between needlework and femininity is never regarded with suspicion by Kruger. She does not realise, for instance, that the separation of art from craft is contingent on a gender-based division of labour. C.King (1992:16) points out that:

Often a skill is gendered only in so far as, if it is done in the home, it is a feminine craft, while if it is paid employment outside the home it is an art for men.

Historically, needlework has been the domain of women, to be done in the domestic sphere. The moment it moves into the public sphere - into the domain of men - it falls under their control and is subjected to ruthless criticism and inspection, based on preconceived ideas about women's work. Some of these prejudices become apparent when one considers that the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument would only accept the gift tapestries '*as dit van bevredigende gehalte en strekking sal wees*' ('if it were satisfactory in quality and objective') (Letter from Board of Control, quoted by Kruger supplement 7). Kruger responds by reinforcing these construction of what 'women's work' entails:

*Net soos die Beheerraad van die Voortrekkermonument ons geskenk sou aanvaar mits die gehalte van die werk bevredigend was, so het ook Coetzer sy voorbehoude gehad. Ons het hulle dit nie verkwalik nie. Ons kon goed verstaan. Hulle was mansmense wat 'n voorstel van totaal onbekende vrouewerk moes uitvoer (Kruger 1988:5).*

(Just as the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument would only accept our gift if the quality of the work was satisfactory, Coetzer also had his reservations. We did not blame them. We understood it well. They were men who had to consider a proposal of women's work completely unknown to them.)

Hence, the conception that needlework is 'women's work' to be made in the domestic sphere, suggests that it is not understandable to men. For this reason, the standard of the work has to be controlled as soon as it moves outside the domestic domain and enters the public sphere.

In accordance with her unquestioning acceptance of needlework as women's work, Kruger accepts WH Coetzer's authority over the women. Despite her attempts to locate the Voortrekker tapestries in the realm of art, Kruger repeatedly refers to the women embroidering the panels as 'the workers' who are in an unequal relationship with the artist, WH Coetzer, who designed the panels. Kruger describes Coetzer's inspections of their work and the anxiety of the women awaiting his response.

*Daar was 'n doek oor die werk die dag toe hy daarna kom kyk het. Sou dit hom bevredig.... Dit was 'n groot en angstige oomblik toe ek die doekie oplig* (Kruger supplement 9e).

(The day when he came to look at the work, it was covered with a cloth. Would it satisfy him.... It was a weighty and anxious moment when I lifted the cloth.)

In this account, it is clear that Kruger accepts the idea of a craft workshop where there is one designer or artist and numerous workers. Parker and Pollock (1981:69) write that in craft history the concern is more with the objects - how they were made, their purpose and function - than with the makers, who are of secondary importance. This becomes clear when permission is asked from the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument for the women to embroider their names onto the panels they had executed. The Board of Control consented provided that '*dit nie opvallend gesien kan word nie*' ('it would not be prominent') (Kruger 1988:29). This decision represents an attempt to undermine the 'art' status of tapestry and also the creative contribution of the women. While Coetzer's initials or, in the case of the middle panel, his full name appear prominently on each tapestry, the so-called workers have to request permission to add theirs.

From this it seems clear that Nellie Kruger's attempts to negotiate an elevated status for the medium of tapestry were not all that successful. This difficulty in redefining needlework is illustrated by the lengthy controversy about the location of the tapestries, which marginalised the tapestries and ultimately reinforces the perceived inferior status of needlework. Kruger proposed at the outset of the project in 1952 that the tapestries should be made for the Voortrekker Monument. She suggested that the 80 feet wall of the basement of the Monument, which was to become a museum of Voortrekker antiquities, would be an appropriate space to exhibit the tapestries. However, this place was later found unacceptable by both WH Coetzer and the women of the VMB, due to humidity which could harm the wool. In addition, the women executing the tapestries now felt that a basement was not suitable for a project which took so long and so much effort to complete. It seems that the women then requested that the tapestries should be placed still in the basement, but closer to what is arguably the focal point of the Monument, namely the cenotaph of Piet Retief and his comrades. It was argued that there was also more light in this area due to an opening in the floor of the Hall of Heroes above the basement. However, in 1958, the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument asserted that the tapestries would be out of place in the venerable atmosphere of this 'holy' space. Despite the women's objections, the Board decided to go ahead with the plans to place the tapestries in the basement - not in the vicinity of the cenotaph, but in fact against the furthest wall. To make matters worse, the tapestries were to be placed 12 feet (3,66m) from glass cases containing antiquities, and Coetzer, in particular, felt that this would not be enough space for the viewer to step back and view the tapestries properly.

In a final gesture that snubbed the efforts of the women, the Board arranged for the handing-over of the tapestries to the Monument to take place on 14 December 1960, two days before the all-important date in Afrikaner history of 16 December, the Day of the Vow, and not on 31 May 1961, as Kruger had hoped. Her disappointment is clear from these words:

*Die byeenkoms [van die oorhandiging] is inderhaas gereël. Die Reëlingskomitee [van die VMB] en die ATKV was van plan om 'n luisterryke oorhandiging te organiseer*

*wanneer die Republiekwording van Suid Afrika op 31 Mei 1961 amptelik by die Monument gevier sou word ... [D]ie groot oomblik wat ons jarelank afgewag het, het stil geloop[sic]. Voordat ons dit besef het, was alles verby (Kruger 1988:48).*

(The function [for the presentation] was organised in haste. The Organising committee [of the VMB] and the ATKV were planning to arrange a magnificent presentation on 31 May 1961 when South Africa's new status as a Republic was to be celebrated at the Monument ... [T]he important moment we waited for all those years, went by quietly. Before we knew it, everything was finished.)

The Board of Control asserted that many visitors were expected to the Monument during the months of December and January and that the public was impatient to see the tapestries. It is, of course, not possible to verify whether this was the real reason why the date for the presentation of the tapestries was brought forward. I dare say, however, that given the broader context of the general marginalisation of the Voortrekker tapestries, it is not unlikely that the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument did not want to receive the tapestries - which they regarded as somewhat insignificant - on 31 May 1961, an historically momentous day for Afrikaners seeking the self-realization and independence believed to have informed the aims of the people depicted in the tapestries.

From 14 December 1960 to 29 September 1966 the tapestries hung in the basement of the Voortrekker Monument. In 1966 the tapestries were removed from the Voortrekker Monument and placed in a newly erected Voortrekker Museum across the street from the Monument - a building which is outside the granite wagon-laager encircling the Monument as a symbol of unity and protection. For Nellie Kruger and the chairperson of the VMB, Ms. Pienaar, this was a disappointment because they felt that the tapestries ought to be kept inside the Monument, and within the circle of ox-wagons which symbolically protects this emblem of Afrikaner power. They had also promised Afrikaner women at the outset of the tapestry project that the tapestries would be made for the Monument itself. Dr. Nicol, however, argued that the new building should not be regarded as being outside the Monument

but as part of the whole Monument complex. Nicol's successor, Mr. FH Odendaal, eventually administered the move to the new building<sup>12</sup>.

Although WH Coetzer expressed his satisfaction with this decision because the tapestries were better displayed in the new building, where a special room was built for them, the removal of the Voortrekker tapestries represented a final attempt by the Board of Control to regulate the presence of Afrikaner women in the Voortrekker Monument complex. Afrikaner women were excluded from the main building, reserved for masculine activity, the public sphere of Afrikaner power.

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<sup>12</sup> This information is obtained from Kruger's book (1988), chapter 11 entitled '*Die verskuiwing*' ('The Removal').

## CONCLUSION

In 1991, the South African Wool Council and the *Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Landbou-unie* (South African Women's Agriculture Union, hereafter SAVLU) came together to launch the *Volkstapissierieë projek* (Volk Tapestries project)<sup>1</sup>. 61 branches of the SAVLU made 40 tapestry panels as a 'treasure for the nation', depicting the 'cultural heritage' of, as a reporter tersely put it, 'the old South Africa'. This meant anything from Tuynhuis (one of the State President's official Cape Town residences) to Overvaal (residence of the Administrator of Transvaal), Bibles, Dutch Reformed Churches, springbok, mines and even a few Boer heroes. To represent the 'rich cultural diversity of South Africa', a panel depicting Ndebele women in ethnic clothes was juxtaposed with a panel depicting a Malay choir in front of Leeuwenhof (residence of the Administrator of the Cape), and the Overvaal panel had an ethnically-inspired border design. It is not difficult to recognise National Party parlance in the last days of its reign in these panels' insistence on cultural diversity. But the women who made them had come some way since their colleagues made the Voortrekker tapestries. Unlike the women of the VMB, those of the SAVLU claim to have made their tapestries for the entire South African nation, not just the Afrikaner *volk*. In their depiction and interpretation of South Africa's history and culture they seem to look at South Africa less exclusively; their construction of history appears to be more open and inclusive.

History shifts even more when we consider the following scenario. In a prime spot in the office of Mr. Tokyo Sexwale, new premier of Gauteng, hangs a 1938 painting of WH Coetzer, entitled *Die Trek oor die Drakensberg* (The Trek across the Drakensberg) (fig. 32)<sup>2</sup>. In it Voortrekker men with rolled up sleeves are battling to keep an ox-wagon steady, while a Voortrekker woman and young girl are looking on. To the viewer,

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<sup>1</sup> This was reported in the *Vrye Weekblad* of 2-6 August 1991, p.31 in an article entitled '47 000 uur se volkskultuur' (47 000 hours of the volk's culture).

<sup>2</sup> This was reported in *Beeld*, 9 August 1994, p.5. My thanks to Michael Stevenson and Amanda Botha for bringing this reference to my attention.



astonished to find this document of the beginnings of apartheid here, Mr. Sexwale explains that this painting by Coetzer is a constant source of inspiration for him, because the Voortrekkers' trek represents the first struggle in South Africa against oppression, and speaks of the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of a fair dispensation. But the mistake the Voortrekkers made, according to Mr. Sexwale, was to trek alone. Sexwale has, in an act of shrewd political rhetoric, reinterpreted and appropriated a part of Afrikaner history which traditionally is seen to be exclusive and racist.

Meanwhile, elsewhere, two art graduates of the Afrikaans university of Stellenbosch are publishing graphic novels with names such as *Gif* (Poison) and *Bitterkomix*. Masterminded by Anton Kannemeyer, Conrad Botes and an imaginary Joe Dog, these comic strips are written in an informal Afrikaans, peppered with crass interjections and explicit sexual imagery, yielding subtle social commentary on and criticism of the South African situation, but especially on the holy cows of the Afrikaner establishment. This is evident from one of the post cards published by *Bitterkomix*, where a young girl wearing a Voortrekker *kappie* (bonnet) and not much more, shows herself off next to a table with a knife pegged into it. The subscript to the post card reads, subversively: 'Sex Drugs Violence Pleasure' (fig. 33). This, it would seem, is the *volksmoeder* of the nineties.

Clearly, ruptures in official Afrikaner history are appearing everywhere - from the SAVLU's subtle attempts to open this history up into a more accommodating version, to the reinterpretation of Afrikaner history offered by the likes of Tokyo Sexwale, and the complete deconstruction and parodying of this history by the *Bitterkomix* team. It is loosely within this framework of reinterpretation and deconstruction that I believe this dissertation should be situated.

In the process of examining the historical and social context which informed the production of the tapestries, I have come across new histories which focus on class and gender relations

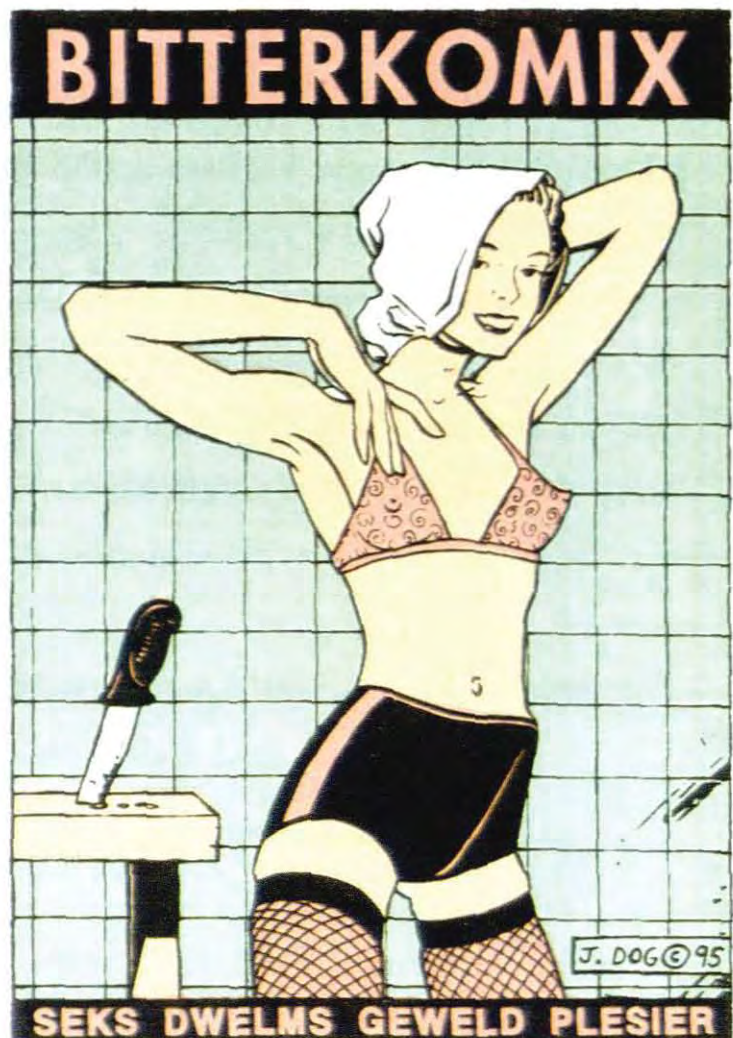
Figure 32: Mr Tokyo Sexwale in front of a 1938-painting by WH Coetzer, 1995.

(Photograph: Beeld 9 August 1994, p.5))



Figure 33: Bitterkomix, 1995

Joe Dog



in Afrikaner history - alternatives to the official history of the Afrikaner past which has repeatedly privileged and supported positions of power. It is these histories that have persuaded me to look at the contents of the tapestries in a new light - to read, in effect, behind the surface of the tapestries. I have found that not only their content, but also their production, conceal processes of power, domination and marginalisation. A deconstructive reading of these mechanisms of power has revealed that the Voortrekker tapestries affirmed the gender and national identities forged by the dominant ideologies of Afrikaner culture.

In conclusion, it is perhaps necessary to acknowledge that, as Bal and Bryson (1991:175) put it, '[t]he art historian is always present in the construction she or he produces.' In other words, my deconstructive reading of the tapestries and, with that, a part of Afrikaner history and culture, reveals my allegiance to an epoch in which Afrikaner identity has increasingly been challenged and fragmented. Since the demise of the apartheid regime and the power of the National Party, it has become clearer than ever before that the label 'Afrikaner' does not denote an homogenous category, and the meaning of being Afrikaans has clearly become contested terrain: the *Broederbond* has recently changed its name to the *Afrikaner Bond*, with its membership open to anyone who speaks Afrikaans as a first language and with no regard to race. At the same time Afrikaans-speaking supporters and members of the ANC government who refer to themselves as Afrikaners, are nevertheless desperately trying to distance themselves from a heritage they have never identified with. On the other hand, the AWB and former President PW Botha are forever warning the government about the wrath of 'the Afrikaners', while Constand Viljoen is negotiating on behalf of the Conservative Party and 'the Afrikaner' for a white *volkstaat* (volk state).

It would seem that 'the Afrikaner' exists perhaps only as a fictive construct, written into the kind of documents that I have explored in this study.

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